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A NEW SILVER KID NOVEL by T. W. Ford

The COLT MASTER

COMPLETE in this issue

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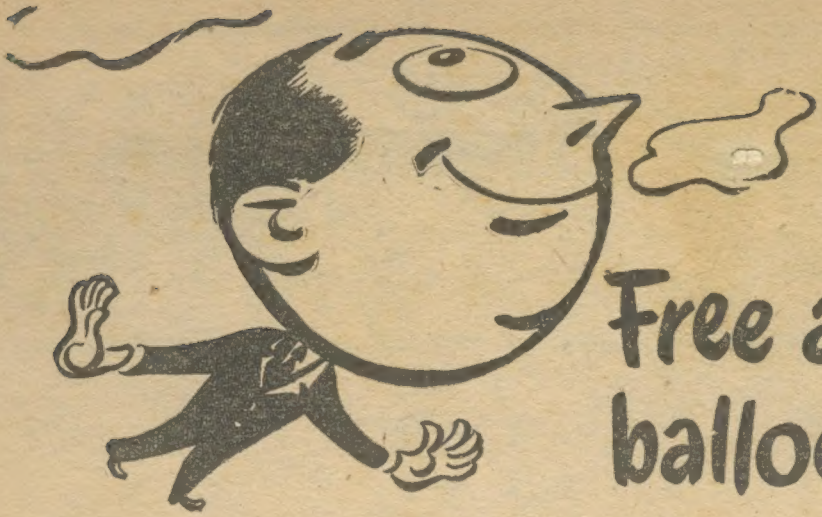

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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Volume 16 **September, 1948** **Number 1**

ACTION-PACKED NEW SILVER KID NOVEL

The COLT MASTER

By T. W. Ford 8

Solo Strant was working with the law when he went after Nogales Mike Burbee — until Marshall Turner was shot, and the Silver Kid found himself framed for the killing. And this woman, Doris Holt, who was also hunting down Nogales Mike didn't help matters!

SHORT STORIES

SAMPSON GETS A HAIRCUT . . . . . By Percy Brown 59
It was rough going when the little runt named Sampson figured he was strong enough to take on the town bully!

THE GRUB LINE . . . . . By Harry Van Demark 65
"The Man Who Fed Tombstone".

BULLET BRIDE FOR A BANKER . . . . . By Cliff Campbell 69
It's unmannerly to beat up a gent you want to borrow money from — and doesn't help making a loan, either!

WATCH OUT FOR HOMER KETCHUM . . . . . By Rex Whitechurch 77
A true story about a stage driver who thought fast.

THE BEARD AND THE BLUE MULE . . . . . By Harry S. Channing 80
Things started to pop in Silver City when this Jerry Dacre comes in riding a sky-blue mule!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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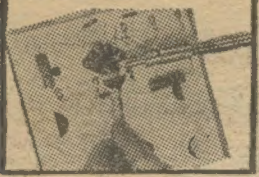

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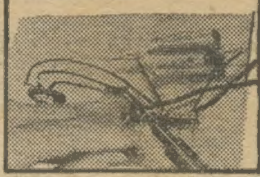

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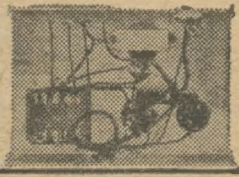

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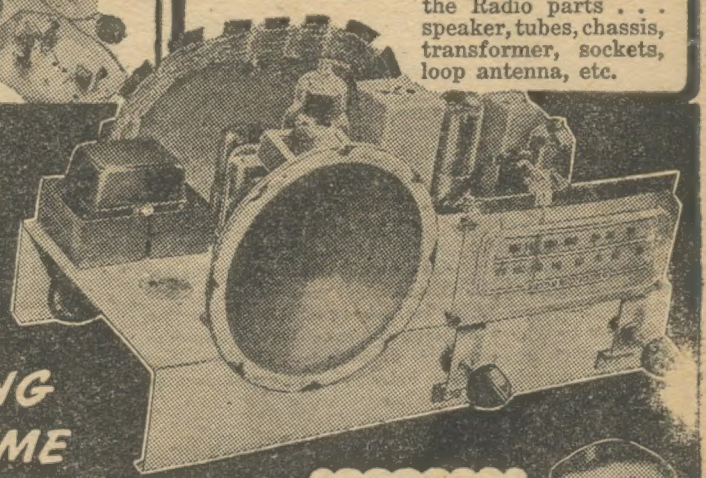

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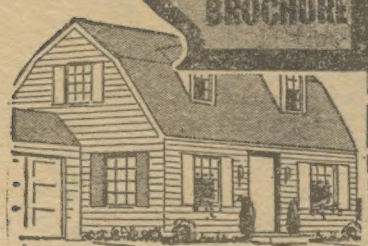

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The Colt Master

Complete New Silver Kid Novel

By T. W. Ford

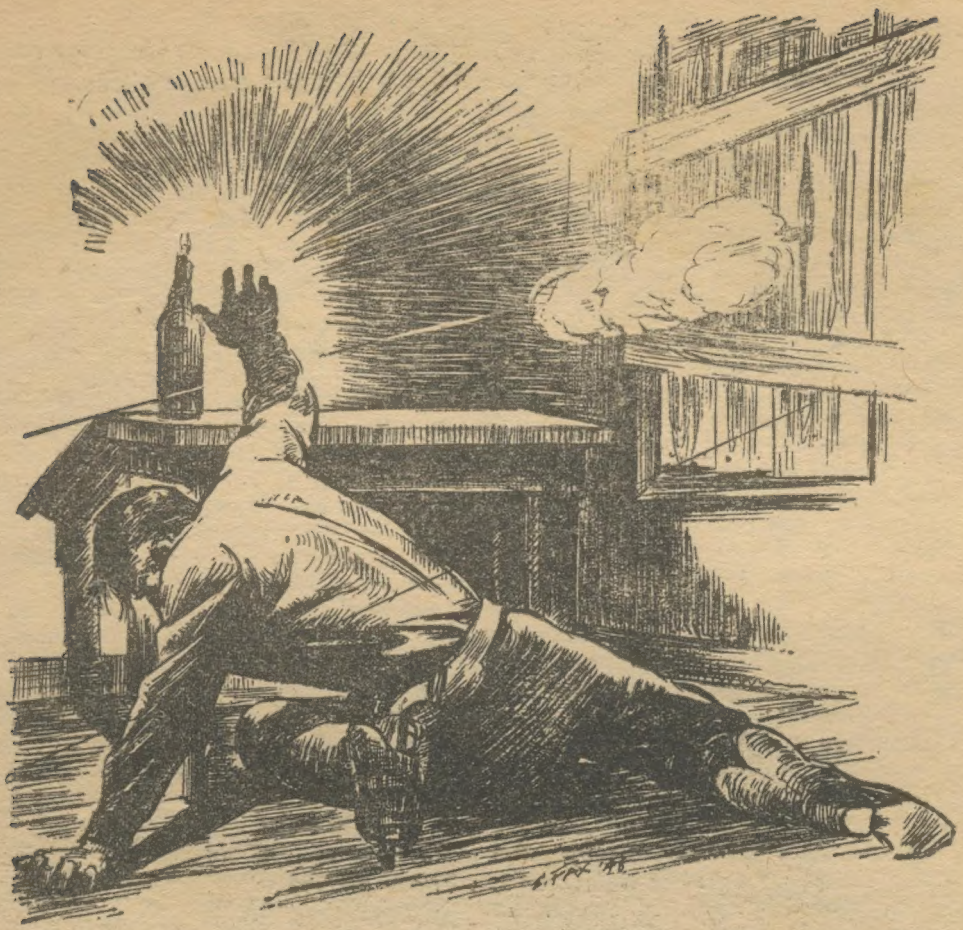
(Author of "Blood And Bullet Law")

The Silver Kid and the Law, represented by U. S. Marshal Link Turner, were both after the same man — Nogales Mike Burgee — and they planned to work together. Then, a third party joined them in the hunt, Doris Holt, who had her own reasons for tracking down Burgee. And that was when the Kid sensed blood on the moon . . .

As Turner reached to douse the lamp, Solo saw . .

1

THE KID fingered the little silver skull slug at his throat, on the chin string of his sombrero, as he approached the old house about a quarter mile out of Broken Butte. It was entirely unconscious; yet it was a never-failing omen, that gesture, that blood was due on the moon. That the acrid odor of burnt gunpowder would



soon be stinging an hombre's nostrils. The Kid, Solo Strant, shifted his drawn gun to a horizontal position as he strode softly toward the ramshackle place, loosened his left weapon in its holster with his right hand as he moved on in. He sniffed the night air like an animal; it was quiet save for the rippling sound of the lazy breeze in the foliage of the cottonwood just behind the place.

The Silver Kid halted, half crouched in the slaunch-wise stance of the gunman. There seemed nothing wrong. Yet long experience on the out-trails had taught him never to ignore one of those hunches of danger; they were like a sixth sense, something he himself did not quite understand, but seldom were they wrong. He shifted over silently some yards to his right so that he could see down past the side of the old place, see the trail up from the town out front. There was no sign of any human critter prowling about.

He threw a glance over his shoulder toward where he had left his paint pony ground-anchored out in the high brush. Nothing stirred back there either. The Kid gently released the hammer of his gun that he had eared back; he was probably just boogery; he decided it had been upsetting to have come so close to capturing Nogales Mike Burgee today. To have come so close—and then missed him.

They'd known he was somewhere in this neck of the woods, had been trailing him for over two weeks. Burgee, a veteran of the owlhoot and an hombre wanted for killings in two states, had slain a friend of the Kid's from behind; that was why Solo Strant was

after him. This was the second time he had just missed catching up with him, Nogales Mike, and it had the usually icy-nerved Kid worried. It seemed as if big red-headed Burgee must be being tipped off when he came around.

U. S. Marshal Link Turner was after Burgee for the hold-up of a stage carrying Federal mail. The Kid and the marshal had hooked up over three weeks ago when they discovered they were both after the same man; and the government had a dead-or-alive reward out for Burgee. Turner and Solo Strant had pooled their information and cold-trailed Burgee together, agreeing that whichever one could catch him would split. Turner was the gent the Kid was going to meet in this abandoned house outside the little range town. They had been using it as a headquarters for several days to keep their presence in that piece of country a secret. They knew there were members of the owlhoot around who would befriend Burgee in case of an emergency.

SOLO ADVANCED through the dimness of evening a few more yards, studying the old house. No lights showed from it, of course; that was to be expected. But still the Kid didn't like the feel of the situation. He was to meet Turner here again; and that girl, Doris Holt, whom they had met on the trail ten days back travelling incognito as a man. She too, according to her story, had a score to settle with Nogales Mike. He had run off with her sister, she said, then deserted her in childbirth. The pert-faced, determined blonde was resolved to force him, at gun point if necessary, to send her sister some dinero.

The Kid studiously eyed the house again. He'd been gone from here over a day and a half, been prowling up Beaver Creek on the basis of information that the outlaw-killer had an old saddle pard up that way. Had located the pard that morning in an orey-eyed condition and gotten him to admit that he'd seen Burgee. That the latter had ridden off to the south less than an hour ahead of the Kid's arrival. Solo had crossed the river at the stage-line ford some miles below, had stopped at the cantina there on the edge of the desert known as Lost Man's Strip. They had denied knowing or seeing anything of any gent answering the description of Burgee.

But about an hour later, the old swamper from the place on his crow-bait, had overtaken the Kid as he rode back down the creek. He'd told Solo that Burgee had been there, had forked out a scant half hour across the desert before the Kid had arrived. The swamper said somebody had come in and given Burgee a message, after which he had hit saddle leather quickly. Solo had not wasted time turning back. For one thing, his paint horse was too jaded; and, for another, the Kid realized that before he could overtake Burgee, the latter would have had ample time to cross the narrow strip of desert and catch the train running southward. Now, though he had the taste of the ashes of failure in his mouth Solo had a heap of respect for Link Turner; he would hate to have to admit to the U.S. marshal that he had been that close to Burgee and missed him.

He moved closer to the house, paused in the shadow of a bush, and gave a three-note whistle like a bird call. The muted answer came from within which meant that Turner was there. The kid moved to the back door, opened it, and glided into the dark kitchen of the place. He went up the short hallway to where lamplight seeped from under the door of the parlor.

"Turner? Turner? This is Strant coming in."

"Come on, kid."

The Kid eased the creaking door open with a boot, then stepped back quickly from the wan beam of light that speared out. His second silver-stocked gun spiked from his left hand. It was Turner in there all right; he knew that from the answer to his whistled signal outside. But there was no telling who else might be with him. They were playing a dangerous game. Nogales Mike had friends in this strip of country, gents whom he dominated out of their fear of his ruthless trigger finger. It would not be unlike the crafty lobo to appear to flee, then loop around and strike back.

THEN THE Kid saw the girl, Doris Holt, through the open doorway. She was a slim-bodied girl with her straw-hued hair hidden beneath the crimson bandanna binding her head. She wore a pair of black pants and a crimson silk shirt beneath a white leather vest. The shirt was skin-fitting and even the vest couldn't mask the curves of her body. Her small face was hollow-cheeked beneath round tawny eyes that were cold and yet somehow challenging to a man. Challenging and at the same time inviting. At times, something about those reminded the Kid of an animal; more than once, since they'd met up and joined forces, Solo Strant wondered if he liked her as a person though at the same time he felt drawn toward her.

She said in that low, emotionless voice, "Come on in, Solo. It's all right." That though she could not see him.

He moved into the ray of light and on into the room with its boarded-up windows. The girl smiled in the faint light, dropped her hand from the butt of the pearl-handed .38 slung at her side. And from behind the rusted pot-bellied Congress heating stove in a corner rose Link Turner.

"Pick up any sign of him, Kid," he asked in that dry voice. He was like his voice, a dried-out man, medium tall, but body shrunken with over-small bones. He was in his forties, hair at his temples more than frosted with gray, the eyes sunken in his yellowed face with a constant tired look. The U.S. marshal was a sick man; yet he drove himself on this manhunt, never seeming tired when action was demanded. His faded blue eyes lighted when the Kid nodded, saying that he'd gotten a tip on Nogales Mike.

"He was in these parts," Solo said pulling off his sombrero. He motioned the girl to the sole chair, a rickety affair, and dropped down on a box himself. Strant was a wire-tough hombre, able to forgo sleep, to stick in the saddle for countless hours, to subject himself to incredible punishment when he was pushing for the showdown. But frustration like today's sapped a man.

"*Was* in these parts?" Turner picked himself up, moving out into the chill room. "He—" A fit of hacking coughing seized him.

Solo nodded as his deft fingers built a tube of Durham with incredible speed. He snapped a match to it, exhaled twin threads of blue-gray smoke. He noticed the Doris woman had not sat down; she moved around on her silver-inlaid boots nervously.

"Yes, Link. He gave me the slip," the Kid said softly. "Again." His eyes got that lidded sleepy look as he thought of it. Cold anger made his eyes that way for the moment.

"Again. . Dammit, damn his spittin' luck," said Turner, wiping his mouth with a bandanna after the coughing fit. "Somebody's gittin' him word."

The Kid nodded again, ejected another cloud of smoke with an impatient jerk of his chin. Through the smoke he saw Doris. She stared off at nothing in the dim-lit room, wearing a slight smile. Then it was gone and Solo figured he'd imagined it. He gave them the details of how close he'd been to Nogales Mike.

WHEN HE finished, Link Turner heeled out his quirly from which he'd only taken a couple of puffs, fought down another coughing spell. The girl picked up the old bucket on the ramshackle table.

"No water. I'll get some," she said and started out to the well behind the house. At the door, she paused to smile openly at the Kid. A smile of relief, it seemed. "I'm glad he didn't see you—and then get away, Solo. If he knew what you looked like—it would be easier for him to set a trap and ambush you sometime." She went on out.

"She doesn't seem to be afraid of Nogales Mike turning back on her," Turner remarked. "That miss sure packs a heap of nerve, by grab." Then he told how he too had run into a cul de sac that day. He'd known an ex-gunman down in these parts, an hombre who'd done time in the Big House, then gone straight. Turner had sent a note to his place back in the hills. The gent had reached Broken Butte that day, had sent word to the mar-

shal through a trusted barkeep. Turner had secretly met the ex-jailbird who still knew a number of the owlhoot gentry. But the man could give him no definite information about Nogales Mike.

Turner shook his graying head wearily. He wanted to finish this job—bring in the man who'd twice in the past escaped after being captured by Federal oficers—and then retire, rest.

"He'll probably hit south on the railroad after crossing Lost Man's Strip," the Kid put in, pinching out the coal of his smoke.

"Mebbe not." Turner shook his head impercetibly. "My man gave me one tip—If Mike Burgee gets desperate or feels he's getting cornered, he'll head for Pinto Haid's bunch. Haid's outfit was operating around the Little Stovepipe country when last heard of..That's since he came back from south of the Border."

THE KID dredged a bit of information from the back of his memory. "Wait, Link—Nogales Mike joining Haid? That smells of skunk sweat. Because before Haid hopped the Line to get outa the country, he and Nogales Mike had a shooting scrape. From what I heard, Mike broke Haid's leg in two places. They say Haid's got a permanent limp as a result. Now why—"

Trying to fend off another coughing spell, the marshall interrupted. "'S right. Haid should hate him. But Nogales Mike later married Haid's sister. Haid, they say, is crazy about her. And the girl is crazy about Mike. So I guess that'd sort of patch up—"

The girl creaked back hurriedly. Doris Holt came in so quickly she sloshed water from the filled bucket over the floor. "Somebody's prowling around back on the hill—I heard them," she said breathlessly.

The Kid was on his feet and gliding out like a ghost. He scouted around behind the place, worked up the hill through the heavy brush and amongst the stand of second-growth yellow pine up there. He found neither hide nor hair of any human critter around and returned to the house. Link Turner passed it off casually, said some cowhands had been up there that afternoon seeking strays. His eyes hardened on the girl.

Solo glanced over. She was just putting a match to one of those tailor-made quirlies she carried. The Kid was always surprised at seeing her smoking but tried to understand. She had had a hard life, admitting to having worked in a dancehall and once running an eating place in a tough silver strike town. "I've always been expected to stand on my own feet like a man. I've had to fight my way for a living—against men. So why shouldn't I have their privileges too?" she'd said once. But to Solo, it gave her a harsh half-wanton look.

He and Link Turner talked some about their next move. The marshal figured it would be best to cross Lost Man's Strip, then see what they could pick up there on the now cold trail. "If we pick up nothing, then there's that tip the ex-jailbird gave me about—" The wracking cough choked off the rest of his words.

Doris Holt ground out her smoke with her boot and patted at a yawn, said she guessed she'd turn in. She slept upstairs. The door closed after her and the sound of her boot heels faded down the hall. Turner went over to his saddle bag and brought out a pint of redeye. The Kid refused a shot. But the marshal needed one after that last coughing attack; sweat glistened on his forehead, Yet he shook as if with cold as he held the bottle to his lips.

He was just saying, "Reckon it'd be safe now—she's late—to start up a little fire in the stove and make a pot of java." Then a muffled human sound came from behind the place. It broke abruptly as if the person had been choked off. Something thudded against the back of the house.

GUNS WHIPPING out as his arms crisscrossed in front of his body in the famed crossarm draw, the Kid was out of the room in a flash. As he started down the hall he glimpsed Turner grab at his throat as he too hit his feet. The sudden action had started another coughing spell. At the back door, the Kid yanked it open and dropped to one knee. His eyes, catlike in the night, quickly adjusted themselves to the darkness—

but there was no sign of movement out in the yard.

He was about to step out when the sound of a gun explosion detonated on the soft night. Harsh and savage. And it seemed to come from inside the house itself. Solo Strant hesitated. Then he heard, distinctly, Link Turner's thin-voiced words.

"Oh-h—my-Gawd!Oh—" And there was the crash of a body going down. Next, "Solo, Solo—" That last was stronger though blurred.

The Kid wheeled and rushed back up the hall to the front room. The marshal was on hands and knees like a maimed animal, feebly shaking his dazed head. A crimson splotch slowly mushroomed on the back of his rusty black coat, smack dab between the shoulder blades. Beside him on the floor was a smear of blood where he'd first fallen. The Kid's sleepy-seeming lidded eyes raked the room. Beneath them his gun muzzles weaved like twin snake heads poised to spit venom. But there was nobody in the room besides Turner.

The Kid was mystified. Yet some sixth sense told him another person was near. Then Turner twisted up his horizontal head, croaked, "The window—" Lifting one hand, wavering like a reed in a swift eddy, he jabbed a finger toward the boarded-up side window.

Staring, the Kid couldn't see anything to make sense out of what the marshal meant. Turner, moving on hands and knees toward the table, coughed up more thin words.

"Git—git outside, K-Kid, and g-git him—"

"But you called me back," purred the Kid in the velvet-soft voice he always unconsciously used in a tight. "Link, you—" He kept frowning at the boarded-up window the marshal had indicated.

"Never—n-never called you," Turner wheezed as he tried to rear to his knees near the table on which the candle stood. "Git outside—"

THEN THE Kid saw. Like a metallic baleful eye, a gun muzzle poked in through a tiny chink in the boards sealing the window. Up from the aperture it now filled ran a crack in the warped wood. The killer outside behind that gun could see in, could see them in the light.

Solo saw and realized the setup in a split second. Then the malignant eye that was the gun bore winked a vicious red. A slug droned by the Kid's shoulder as the latter was diving floorward. At the same instant, reaching up, the mortally hit Turner doused the candle with his hand.

The Kid's right gun crashed out red-yellow splints of flame toward the boarded-up window in the sudden blackness. No curse, no pain-torn scream of a wounded man outside answered his shots. Silence settled like a soft engulfing veil.

Instinct told the prone Kid that gun nose had been with-drawn from the chink. He strained his ears, listening. Held his breath. There was no sound, not even of another human critter's breath. He knew then the marshal was dead.

Somewhere off from the side of the house, pony hoof-beat a muffled fading drum tattoo in departure—

2

THEN HE was running down the hall to the rear again, flinging headlong into the yard. He couldn't see the fleeing rider, but the sound of the pony hoofs told him the other was beating to the northwest. He thanked Heaven he had not yet unsaddled his paint horse as he raced up into the high brush where he'd left the animal ground anchored. But the cayuse wasn't there. Gone.

In the dim glow of the starlight that percolated through the foliage, he was able to follow the trail of the led-away horse by bent-down grass and broken brush. Up around the edge of the cottonwood clump he came upon the pony, ground-anchored by its reins again. Impulsively he leaped into the hull, but he failed to throw home the spur steel.

A mile or so off to the northwest the trail led into that canyon with its hardpan bottom that would take scarcely any tracks. And a little way in the canyon there was a fork where it branched. The fleeing killer might continue on to the northwest or take the side of the fork that bent around

to the south. Solo realized he would be too far behind to see which way the rider went by the time he got to the fork. Besides, there was Link Turner back in the house; he might not be really dead yet.

Down behind the place, the Kid dropped to the ground, then remembered Doris. The gunfire should have brought her down. He called for her through the opened back door. The stairs to the second floor ran up just inside the door. "Doris!" he cried louder. There was no response. He started in.

Something clinked and glittered; his boot toe struck it and sent it rolling in little circles over the dirt. He picked it up. It was a ten-dollar goldpiece he saw at once; a hole had been punched through the center. Stepping inside, he struck a match, scrutinized it, certain it had not been out there on the hard-packed dirt before. Down at an edge of the gold coin he saw the scratched initials, "M.B." Mike Burgee?

He called the girl again, went up the stairs to find her room empty. As he descended, a late moon came over the horizon to bathe the yard outside the door in a silvery glow. In it he picked out one of those white leather gloves Doris Holt wore. His quick brain put the well-known two and two together. Doris worried about hearing somebody around when she'd gone out for the water. Before going upstairs, she must have stepped out for another looksee. After all, the girl was independent and nervy, never had seemed afraid for herself. And somebody—the killer, doubtlessly—had jumped her in the yard. The killer or a pard. That would explain the choked cry he and Turner had caught. Apparently now, the fleeing ambusher had taken the girl off with him.

Solo Strant felt as if he were stumbling blindfolded through a labyrinth. As if, as he groped along on this manhunt dogging Nogales Mike's cold trail, eyes were always watching him, knowing his next move almost before he made it. He was like a man trying to play a poker hand with the backs of the cards turned toward him.

HE WENT back to the front room where Turner lay. As he relighted the candle, he caught the sound of hoofs in the dust coming up the trail from Broken Butte. Then he heard them no more and figured the riders had taken the side trail south down to the big Turkey Track outfit. As he knelt beside the marshal, now motionless on his face, the candle glow climbed down the walls. Flickered and lapped with yellow light over Link Turner's face.

The strained look was gone from it now, replaced by a deep serenity. In vain, Solo Strant felt for a heartbeat, put his cheek close to the parted lips to see if he could catch the faintest semblance of breathing. There was none; the U.S. marshal had taken the last long trail. For a moment, cold fury twisted the Kid's usually poker face. And Turner, though a dogged manhunter, had always had a reputation for giving even a mangy wolfish killer a square break. Had been known as a man who abhorred bloodshed.

"I'll square the score for you, Turner," the kneeling Kid vowed in a half whisper. "Figure it was Nogales Mike Burgee. Uh-huh. And I'll track him down into Hell's own sougan if I have to, Turner." The reined-in rage even made him tremble slightly. It was such a brutal cold-blooded dry-gulching. Done the way you'd slaughter an animal.

Then the Kid got a grip on himself. It was no time for blowing his skypiece. Hit the trail of the killer—that was his next move. And, since discovering that goldpiece, apparently a luck-piece, he was almost certain it was Mike Nogales. Too, he was the only hombre in these parts who'd have a motive. "Pinto Haid—over in the Smokepipe Country," he murmured the key names of the piece of information Turner had picked up concerning Nogales Mike's objective. Then the Kid holstered his second gun, turned poor Turner on his back, and started through his pockets.

He couldn't leave the U.S. marshal just laying there. Before he hit the trail, he'd cut down into town, inform the local John Law about the killing, turn over personal identification papers of Turner's. His superior officer would have to be notified, and perhaps his family would want to claim

the body. Just as he was removing a wallet from an inside coat pocket of the corpse, that board in the hall creaked.

The Kid twisted on a knee, right hand diving across to the gun on his left hip. Even as his fingers touched the still warm silver butt, the bullet from the doorway—a warning shot—horneted past his head.

"Don't try it, stranger! We got a heap uh room in our Boothill," a pole-thin angular man with the lawman's badge on his vest rasped from the doorway. His smoking .45 covered the Kid dead center, and there were three men behind him, their smokepoles cleared of holster leather and cocked too.

Solo didn't even try. After all, there was no reason for him to buck the Law now. He rose, hands held away from his body. "Mister—"

"Reg'lar danged ghoul, too, ain't you?" snapped out the lank lawman, striding in. The trio followed, fanning out. One of them stepped in quick, jabbed his gun muzzle into the Kid's mid-section so sharply it produced a grunt. Then he started for the Kid's weapons with his free hand.

"Don't be so damn hasty, amigo," the Kid purred. And with steely nerves, he calmly dropped his hands straight down, not in drawing position, over the guns slung butt forward for the cross-arm draw, "Mister—"

The man with the law badge drew himself up, red-rimmed eyes blazing. He was being very pompous; it was plain he didn't often make an arrest. "Stranger, fer your information, I'm the Justice of Peace of Broken Butte. Joe Forster—Trigger Joe, as I'm sometimes called!"

THE KID decided to play up to the man's vanity. Nodded. "Mr. Forster, I'm not a-robbing the dead. Nor did I kill this gent, a U.S. marshal, as you seem to think. I was his saddle pard and—" He started to give the details of how Link Turner had been dry gulched in the back.

Forster cut him short with a mocking honk. "Them lies don't fool me, stranger! Naw. We know what happened. Some pilgrim a-coming down this trail heard the yelling and cursing in here when you two," he thumbed at the dead man, "was fighting. That pilgrim rode into my office and told me there was a shooting up here; he was scairt to investigate. But he was danged certain one gent had been killed. Seems, from what he heard, you was arguing with this marshal about a piece of some reward dinero. So, now just hoist your dewclaws and—" He was pulling a pair of handcuffs from the pocket of his sagging knee-length coat as he spoke.

"Who was this gent with that locoed windy?" the Kid said.

"Don't know." Forster shook his head. "Stranger just riding through. And it don't look like he was a-lying. Or ain't that a dead man there? And I'll bet a sawbuck 'gainst a dobie dollar there're empty shells in your—hoglegs."

The Kid started to speak, then remembered the shots he had smashed at the ambusher outside the boarded-up window. The peace officer bent and scooped up the wallet from the dead man's body. The Kid had dropped it when he'd seen the lawman in the doorway. Forster flipped it open.

"That poor devil *was* a U.S. marshal," he piped in surprise. "And gunned in the back! This is a *real* bad case, I reckon. Hoist them—"

"Nobody saw me shoot him," the Kid said quietly, ignoring the command to raise his hands. "You're just taking the say-so of some saddle bum you never saw before, John Law—Do you know who I am?"

Forster sneered under his ragged mustache. "Sure. A lowdown coyote who's a-going to be dancing on air at the end of a hempen halter danged soon! Now—"

"My handle is Strant, Solo Strant, lawman. Some folks know me as the Silver Kid—"

One of the others made a gasping sound. One who'd heard a heap about the Kid. "Danged if he ain't, Joe! Leastwise, he's sure rigged out like him. Looks like they tell he does, too."

Forster hesitated, mouth partially opened. His eyes ran over the Kid. Took in the wasp-waisted half pint figure. The lean-cheeked triangular boyish face with the ragged black hair escaping from his sombrero over his

forehead. The sleepylooking dark eyes that had caused more than one gent to get careless by their misleading somnolent look.

The jasper who'd been standing with his Colt muzzle against the Kid's shirt drew back, startled at having jumped such a gent. His gun barrel sagged.

"WELL-L, I don't know. I—" Forster gnawed an end of his mustache. His red-rimmed eyes checked the Kid's rigged. The old cracked boots. But clipped to them were spurs with rowels fashioned from Mex silver dollars. The flaps of the Kid's black batwing chaps were spangled with silver conchas. His worn black shirt boasted a double line of silver buttons down the front. Forster's gaze dropped back to the double gunbelts girding Solo's waist. To the smokepoles with the gleaming silver butts. Then his look lifted to the Kid's weather-warped sombrero, black too. Conchas decorated its band. Finally the peace officer's eyes switched back to the little silver skull beneath the Kid's jaw, slung on the chin strings of his sombrero.

His eyes held there a long moment. It was a gleaming grisly thing, that finely tooled miniature replica of a human skull. A thing that stamped itself on a man's memory. Some gents, staring at it the last instant before one of the Kid's gun muzzles spoke, carried that memory to Hell.

Forster switched his eyes to the dead marshal. Then he jerked his head negatively. "Naw. Mebbeso you are passing yourself as the Silver Kid. Mebbe that's how you fooled the marshal. But you ain't Strant!"

"Listen, Forster—"

"Shet down! Strant'd never shoot a man in the back! Son, git his hoglegs!"

The younger man on his left, lanky though shorter than his lawman-father, but with the same redrimmed eyes, moved toward the Kid. The latter knew the time had come to make his play, that he had no alernativve. He shrugged, slowly moved his hands down to his gun butts.

"Careful there, you coyote!" Forster warned.

But the Kid took the butts carefully between thumb and forefingers of each hand, not gripping them. He unhurriedly eased the weapons from the holsters. Slid a finger through the trigger guard of each so that they hung suspended, butts forward, muzzles turned toward Solo himself, in no position to fire. He extended them thus toward the peace officer's son His lidded eyes noted how the other men relaxed, Forster himself uncocking his own weapon as he drew a stogie stub from a vest pocket, His son, coming close, reached to take Solo Strant's shooting irons.

It happened. Faster than a man could w i n k. The Kid's wrists snapped. The twin Colts spun on the single finger of each hand, noses and butts swapping ends. The latter slapped back into his palms. In a split second, Solo Strant had young Forster covered. Even had one gun against the latter's chest before the others could even t h i n k to pull a trigger. Then it was too late, unless they wanted the lawman's son to die. The latter choked on a curse, eyes blinking and goggling.

3

BUT ONE of the gent's he'd deputized for this mission got proddy. He was a squat froglike man, balding in front, with oversized globes of wet-looking light eyes. His tongue jerked out of a corner of his mouth with a sucking sound as the Kid pulled his slick play. The man growled something unintelligible, started to sidled behind one of the others for protection. And his gun moved up horizontal.

The peace officer caught it from a corner of his eye. "Stop it, Pheb!" he got out hoarsely. "Pen that hoglegs, you idiot! You want to see Bob git a skinful of lead? Stop!"

Pheb shuffled huge feet in runover boots uneasily. His eyes blinked though the lids didn't shutter over them. "I'd—like—to—kill—him," he said in a sodden kind of voice.

"Button up," the peace officer barked.

"I'm leaving," the Kid announced.

"Taking him—your son—as hostage, Forster—Don't give me any trouble and he'll come back unharmed. Sabe?"

Forster nodded heavily. The Kid stuck his left gun in his waistband a moment, then pulled Bob Forster's Colts from the sheath and dropped it on the floor. Solo motioned with his head. The others moved to the front of the room, and Solo herded his hostage out into the hall, down it and into the back yard. The posse's horses were out there with the Kid's paint.

At the Kid's order, young Forster climbed into the kak of a big roan. A crashing battering sound came from the front of the place as Solo himself mounted swiftly. The two spurred up toward the stand of cottonwoods on the hill, and a bullet hissed by the Kid's head.

He half wheeled his horse as the pistol report reached him. Another slug nicked his sombrero brim. Out of the high rank grass at a back corner of the house the livid muzzle flash of a gun knifed the night again. It was about all the Kid had to shoot at as, from the saddle, he steadied his gun over his crooked left forearm. He triggered twice.

THE NEXT stab of powder flame from the Colts down there slanted skyward. Then there was a screech of pain followed by a roar more animal than human, and the froglike Pheb plunged out of the grass into view, holding up his now gunless shooting hand. In the moonlight the blood could be seen dripping from it. Solo knew he'd hit him in the hand, possibly left his deadly bullet brand on it.

With Pheb out in the open, the Kid with his gun wizardry could have blasted him down easily, but he hated to take a life unless there was no alternative, unless it was his own hide or the other hombre's. And for a fleeting instant he even felt sorry for the poor devil. For whoever bore that bullet brand of his, that scar furrow of a slug across the hand, was destined inevitably for a six-foot plot in some Boothill—very soon.

Solo was already swinging his cayuse back up the hill. Young Forster had thrown the spur steel to his big roan and was busting for the cover of the stand of cottonwoods. The Kid had expected that, but he held his fire a moment as he started after the other. And then the roan hit a hidden hole in the underbrush and went crashing.

The peace officer's son went flying through the night, struck the ground heavily on a shoulder. When he reeled up, he was so dizzy he was helpless. As the Kid rode up on him, he stood beating at his forehead to clear his brain. Solo tapped him on the shoulder with his smoking gun. In a matter of moments, Bob Forster had clambered back in the kak and they were pushing into the screen of trees.

The Kid hauled up after a few hundred yards to listen, but no sound of headlong pursuit reached him; Joe Forster thought too much of his son's hide. After all, the peace officer believed the Kid was the ruthless killer who'd pumped a slug into Turner's back.

"All right—push on," the Kid ordered his hostage. "I ain't got no craving to put a window in your skull, so don't try any tricks." He saw that young Forster was pale, chagrin stamped on his bony face. The younker felt like a fool, Solo understood. He took a course to the north when they came to rolling rangeland. About a half hour later, they came to a cart track that meandered off westward, followed it.

The stars were dimming with a faint seeage of pre-dawn light staining the eastern horizon when they waded their ponies into Beaver Creek.

"Dismount, Forster," the Kid ordered.

THE PEACE officer's son said something under his breath, then dropped off in the shallow water. The Kid, taking the reins of the other's horse, thumbed toward the bank they'd just quitted. Young Forster stared.

"You mean—you mean I'm supposed to walk all the way—"

"Git going," the Kid commanded. "I'm a killer, ain't I, according to your dad? What am I supposed to do, nurse you? There was that hoe-man's place a coupla miles back, anyway."

The peace officer's son moved back to the bank, pulled off his boots and drained the water from them, then started up the trail, the wagon track, along which they'd come. The Kid crossed the creek, leading the other horse. On the far bank, he cut behind the willows bordering the stream, waited till he saw young Forster vanish from sight under the moon as he passed over a rise. The Kid built himself a quirly, fired it up, then finally rode south along the creek. After a few hundred yards, he cut into the stream so as to leave no trail, then continued to push south until he knew he was opposite that canyon.

He turned into it, rode till the dawn came up and the first roseate glow of the sun bloomed in the sky. Then, dismounted, he worked up a side of the cut down the branch of the fork that bent southward. Atop the canyon wall, he moved into a stand of timber. As he picketed the paint pony after unsaddling it, he saw that it was going to be a stifling sultry day. He bedded down in his blanket in a thicket that hid him from view, placed one reloaded Colts on a small stump by his shoulder. But he couldn't sleep at once; his mind teemed with a parade of thoughts, speculation, suspicions.

Lying there he fingered the luck piece, the ten dollar gold coin, he'd picked up. The slaying of Turner had been planned, timed, of course. The assassin had probably been waiting outside the chink in the window boards for some time. The Kid mentally berated the foolhardiness of Doris Holt that had led her to venture outside in the night without informing them.

Something else came to him as abruptly as a thunder clap. He himself had been shot at. Once as he stood fully revealed, to the one outside, in the candle glow. Yet the gunner had missed him, a standing target who didn't even know whence to expect the shot—which meant Turner's murderer never intended to get him, the Kid, at all. That was why word had been sent down to the peace officer of the slaying before it had actually happened.

That meant there had to be a second hombre—a second one besides Nogales Mike, because the Kid was dead certain it had been their quarry who'd looped back and cut down the marshal. And by thus not killing him, the Kid, they'd hung the killing on him. It was slicker than slobbers. The Law, now, would seek out no other killer, wouldn't be looking for the real one. And, bleakly, the Kid admitted to himself the odds were heavily stacked against his catching Mike Burgee much less hanging the deadwood on him.

HE STARED up at a couple of beams of wan sunlight that percolated through the foliage, started to push up on an elbow. Then he conquered that deep-rooted impatience, one of his outstanding traits. It would be locoed to keep on hitting the trail now with his paint so boogered down.

Before he dozed off, he thought of the girl with the wheat-colored hair, Doris. The killer had obviously taken her off with him. The Kid could not guess why save that, in coming on him unexpectedly, she had realized what he meant to do. What he had done. So he'd had to kidnap her to ensure her silence. In that moment, Solo became aware of the fact that he had worried little about her welfare.

But he'd seen enough of her to feel she could take care of herself under almost any circumstances. And he realized too that, at times, half unconsciously, he disliked her. Yet on the other hand, he felt almost irresistably drawn to her. In a strange way.

Then a new thought jumped into his head. She, Doris Holt, could have slipped out and done the killing...

4

ONLY A few hours later, under the boiling sun, he was forking the paint on up that branch of the canyon. There had been no sign of pursuit; they had evidently lost

the trail where he'd swung into the creek, not knowing which direction he'd taken, upstream or downstream, That simplified things, not having manhunters on his back-trail. He had a tough enough job before him, anyway.

At a little rock spring, he filled his leathern water bag, then drank deep himself. After that he let the paint quench its thirst. He gulped down some jerked beef and stale Dutch oven bread from his saddle roll, then fired up a tube of Durham as he rode on. The only thing to do, he'd figured, was to push into the Little Smokepipe country, try to locate Pinto Haid's outlaw headquarters. From the information Turner had picked up, the marshal had predicted Nogales Mike would join up with his brother-in-law, Haid, if he felt the pursuit getting too hot. Now, the Kid calculated it, with the U. S. marshal out of the picture, it would still be logical for Nogales Mike to go to see Haid, especially with the lobo leader being that close.

"Nogales Mike is a smart un," the Kid murmurred as he rode at a steady hand lope. "He'd hole up with Haid just to be on the safe side, to wait and see if I was grabbed for the killing back there at Broken Butte... Yeah. And to see if there was anybody else still dogging his coat tails. So..."

He drew out the gold luck piece, flipping it so it glittered in the fierce sunlight. It was the only piece of evidence he had. And blasting down Nogales Mike, once he learned beyond doubt that he was Turner's murderer, would not be sufficient. To clear himself. Solo realized, he'd have to prove Mike was the killer in the eyes of the world.

He had ruled out the girl as the possible killer before he drifted off to sleep that morning. When he'd wakened later, his brief suspicion of her seemed positively locoed. She'd had no motive; she, too, had a score to settle with Mike Burgee, wanted him caught. And the Kid recalled a remark she'd made to him a few days ago on the trail. Looking at Marshal Turner, she'd said:

"I've learned to trust no man— in my life. Sometimes I've hated every human critter that wore pants. But him," and she'd indicated the ailing yet dogged Turner with a nod, "I think he's—well, really fine. I'd trust him with my life..."

No, she wouldn't have killed Turner, Solo decided as he emerged from the canyon. The trail twisted downward through rough broken country and into a sprawling valley. It bent like a great crescent to the southwest, half desert at this upper end with stretches of dune-broken sand, strips of mesquite, the vegetation sparse and stunted. It was drab depressing country, devoid of human habitation, like the tail-end of creation. Following a sand-hill trail after giving his cayuse a breather, he forked down the valley.

AS THE waning afternoon shadows lengthened, the sand patches became scarcer. There were long stretches of grassy wells. Clumps of cottonwood. No more mesquite jungles or little dunes crowned with bunch grass. He passed a soddy, a mile on a plow chaser's shack though there was no sign of anybody about it. This widening valley had once been a big barren floor, a wasteland where even a buzzard would starve, scored by long dried-up litle creek beds. Lacking enough water and grass to support even a handful of culls.

There had been sporadic reports of gold to be found in the potholes of its creek beds. Prospectors pushed into the deadlands, gave it its name of the Smokepipe Country by the pieces of smokepipe they stabbed into the sterile earth to mark a spot where they'd found a little seep spring or a brackish waterhole. Then, a score or so of years ago, in a wild spring flood, the Wild Snake River, on the other side of the saw-toothed hills at the west side of the valley, had broken its banks.

It was like an act of the Almighty. The stampeding stream coursed east-

ward, roared into a defile that cut through the ridge, carving itself a new bed. And it emerged on the east side of the hills in the Stovepipe country, dropped into one of the old creek beds, chiselled it deeper and broader. When the flood subsided with the cessation of the spring rains and the last of the melted snow from the hill, the Wild Snake remained in its new course, and made a new country out of the Stovepipe.

He was working deeper into that new country now, rangeland that had boomed almost overnight like some gold-strike town. Cowmen had rushed in to grap up chunks of the now lush range country. Brands had been hurriedly registered. Men with a few cow critters and a hungry rope had set up, then to be followed by out and out rustlers. There had been a period of lawless violence, next a fierce blood-letting feud between two of the big outfits that was known as the Smokepipe War. Finally law had come, and the Smokepipe had settled down by the time the railroad reached its main town down at the south end of the valley, Headstone.

As he passed another bunch of cows grazing off to the west and crossed one of the feeder streams running into the Wild Snake, the Kid wondered what the lobo, Pinto Haid, was doing in these parts. The big cow outfits rodded the country right sternly since the days of the old cowmen's feuds. They didn't want any trouble of bloodletting to interfere with their business.

He rode through shadows like purple liquid as he rounded a small mesa. The track had become a broader trail now with wheel tracks in the fetlock-deep dust. On the Kid's left, as he skirted a stand of timber ran the barbed wire fence of some outfit. A hundred odd yards on he came to where a little hoof-cut side path broke off from the road just the other side of a massive boulder. He was already swinging out of the kak, legs a little stiff, to give the paint a breather, when he saw it.

A QUIRLY butt, dead now, it lay a few feet up the side path. Standing in one stirrup, he eyed it intently. It was no tube of hand-rolled Durham. It was one of those tailor-made smokes. He hit the ground, went over, and hunkered down by it. Doris had smoked tailor-made cigarets. It was a long shot but—

It wasn't such a long shot; he did not even have to pick it from the earth to see. Turned up toward him on the butt was the symbol of the brand, a red star stamped on the paper. She had smoked Red Stars. Few gents used tailor-made quirlies, and the Red Star brand of the latter was one seldom seen.

He tried to figure it. If she was smoking, her hands were probably free. By this time, of course, Nogales Mike, or whoever her captor was, must have discovered she was a woman. But why keep holding her as a hostage? That was what the Kid couldn't savvy. Unless, somehow, she had escaped and was driving on into the Stovepipe country on her own. But as he moved up the little path quickly he saw there were two ponies, from the tracks, that had passed that way. And sometime that day, he figured. The path went up a short sharp rise through heavy brush, angled off to the left.

From the crest, in the thickening twilight, he could see a few hundred yards along the path. But then it dropped into a huge basin that held a dense chaparral jungle. The two riders—Doris and Nogales Mike, possibly—could be following one of the cow paths through the high black stalks of the chaparral and remain unseen. Solo hesitated but a split second, one hand sliding up and down a gun butt. Just as he wheeled, on the stillness came the whinny of a horse from down in the chaparral.

If it was them they weren't far ahead.

The Kid went leaping down the rise back to his pony. Never believing he was trailed, Nogales Mike probably hadn't ridden too hard. Solo realized this was a break for him, a

boon from Lady Luck. He was just scooping up the reins when the voice challenged him.

"Freeze in your tracks, stranger! Grab sky!"

THE KID'S eyes tried to spear through the haze of the waning day. He knew the gravel-throated voice had come from back of the wire fence across the road, knew that the unseen gent would have the drop on him. Shrugging, he faced that way, hoisting his hands to shoulder height lazily.

"Plumb nice way to greet a pilgrim," he said easily, advancing. But his sharp eyes had already cut toward that stump to the right of the side path. When he came abreast of it, he hurled himself sideward, hands ripping across his body for his guns. He hit the soft leaf-padded dirt behind the stump, surprised that no storm of lead had been blasted his way. Shoving his sombrero back on his shoulders, the Kid started to peer around the stump.

Then that gun barrel plunked down across his skull from the rear. The blow didn't bat him unconscious. He just went limp, swaying on his knees, vision blurred as the smokepoles sagged in his hands. As he went over against the stump he glimpsed the black-bearded gent who'd slipped up behind him.

When he came out of the fog, he had been hauled to his feet. The black bearded one was covering him with a .45 in one hand the while he held a cupped match in the other. He studied the Kid's face, shook the ragged spike of beard. "Don't you know him, Pete?"

Pete, who'd come through the fence, stood with a rifle held in the crook of his arm. Solo's silver-stocked Colts protruded from the waistband of his jeans bulged out by a pot belly. "He sure acted boogery.... Could be one of *El Aracnidos men*." He spat tobacco juice into the grass. "They's been talk that danged Spider was bringing up some new trigger slammers from south of the Line... What are you doin' in these parts, fella?"

The Kid realized at once that they didn't know him, that he hadn't been grabbed as a fugitive from the Law, a killer. "Cold trailing a coupla riders," he answered, deciding to be fairly frank. "One of 'em put out the light of a saddle pard of mine."

Pete sneered. "Likely yarn. I figger—"

The Kid broke in, impatient to head down into that chaparral. He jabbed a finger at the faintly discernible hoof cuts in the side path. "Look—you can see two riders went up this way. Didn't you see 'em? One of 'em was a big red-headed gent. The other was a woman rigged out like a man and—"

"Sure. She had two children with her, and they was driving a covered wagon," snorted the bearded hairpin derisively. "Pete, better take him in and let the Old Man give him a look-see! That last warning of the Spider's to git outa the country meant he was planning trouble."

In a couple of minutes the Kid was back in the saddle. But he was gunless, and his hands were lashed behind his back with a length of pigging rawhide. He was fuming with impotence, at losing his chance to pick up that trail down into the chaparral. But he had no choice as Pete, mounted beside him, jerked at the bridle of Solo's pony. They loped ahead on the main trail. The Kid sensed some trouble was busting in the Smokepipe Country from the vague allusions of his two captors. And cow outfits did not keep guards posted along their fenceline under ordinary circumstances.

FOLLOWING the fence on the left, they put several miles behind them, fording another creek. Then they topped a rise and dropped down toward a ranch-house in a shallow hollow. A moon had risen. And as they turned into the yard Solo noted the "B.T." burnt into the gate posts. Then he saw the burly figure,

a six-gun gleaming in his hand, in the darkened doorway.

"Picked up this ranny on the trail, Travis," called Pete. "He acted right pee-culiar. Figured he might be one of the Spider's boys."

"Bring him in," answered Ben Travis from the doorway. He had a deep thick voice with a note of harrassment in it.

The main room of the ramshackle place that was peeling paint had blankets hung at the windows. A low-turned lamp on a table that still held some greasy tin plates gave the only illumination. The place was poorly furnished with old stuff that looked as if it had been dropped haphazardly around the worn mud-tracked carpet. No touches of a woman's hand were visible. Travis pushed the arm-shackled Kid over close to the lamp, squinting down at him from beneath shabby eaves of brows. Travis was a burly sloppy hunk of man-beef, one shirt tail drooping out over stained gray pants. He had a bloated brickhued face, his breath redolent of whiskey when he breathed.

"Where's that greaser, the Spider, now?" he demanded.

Solo Strant frowned. "I'm a stranger here, Travis. Never been in these parts afore. So I don't know this Spi—" The heavy crack of Travis' open hand over his mouth stopped the words.

"Don't lie to me, you dirty little coyote!" His hand, that had dropped onto the Kid's shoulder, vised hard, the powerful fingers taloning into the bone painfully. Travis yanked a gun and dented the Kid's chest with it. "Git that jaw wagging, mister!"

The Kid cursed softly, lid-veiled eyes eating into this rancher. Travis, noting ever detail of him for future identity. Cursing back, Travis snapped the gun nose against the Kids jaw, tearing the skin. Blood ran. Solo whitened a little but refused to show any sign of pain. And he saw that, really, Ben Travis was afraid himself, inside. With his roaring and brutality he was like a scared younker whistling the while he passed a graveyard.

"Talk! Why is the Spider after me? Why in blazes is he a-trying to ruin me? Not that I won't nail the gopher's hide to the fence yet! But why? Where is he now? Come on, damn you!" He struck the Kid hard with a heavy hairy fist.

SOLO REELED. Then lashed out with a boot, but Travis jumped aside just in time. He struck Solo, still unsteady from the gun tap over the skull, with a crashing arm. The Kid was thrown back against the fireplace. His legs collapsed under him as he fought to retain conscious. He slid down against the cemented stones of one side of the hearth, the rough rocks tearing the skin of his trussed-up wrists. Travis stood there panting, then picked a jug off the table and took a deep gurgle.

"Mebbe he ain't one of *El Aracnido's* snakes, at that," he conceded thoughtfully, whisky dripping off his chin. "Mebbe just a saddle bum riding the grubline."

"Here's his hardware," said Pete, putting the Kid's weapons on the table. The silver butts refracted lamplight in glittering spears.

Travis' eyes hardened as he gazed upon them. And then he did an about-face. He grabbed up one of the shooting irons. "Guns like these, eh... Fancy weapons, Pete." He cut his eyes toward the Kid who was just regaining his feet. Then began to roar again. "By Gawd, he's a gunfighter—a doggone fancy trigger slammer! It's writ all over him! I can see that now."

He picked up a braided quirt, measuring the Kid with puckered up eyes. Then he abruptly changed his mind once again. "We'll hold him and take him in to town and turn him over to the marshal tomorrow. That's what we'll do. Sure. We'll charge him with attempted rustling. You saw him trying to cut our fenceline, didn't you, Pete?"

Pete scratched his belly, frowning. "I never said that, boss. I—"

"Idiot!... Git a wire cutters from

the bunkhouse. It'll be the one he was using when you an' Sam jumped him. So if he's one of *El Aracnido's* gunslicks, he'll just be cut outa the deck for a good spell..."

5

SOLITARY, on the cot in an upstairs room where they'd thrown him, the Kid lay helpless in the dark, ankles too lashed up now. He lay very still, forced to brace one elbow on the outside edge because the bed tilted that way. But he was quivering inside with a cold unremitting fury. At moments, he felt like the butt of some practical joke by the little gods of Fortune.

All evidence tended to point to him as the killer of Link Turner. To brand him as a cold-blooded murderer. If that Forster tracked him down, it would undoubtedly mean the rope. Yet here he was, lying like a hogtied calf waiting to be branded. Come morning, they'd take him into Headstone, and he'd be tossed into the cuartel on a trumped-up charge. All the time, Nogales Mike's trail would be getting colder and colder. With him, according to all the signs, would be Doris Holt, the only other person who could clear him.

From below came Travis' growling voice following the thud of the jug being replaced on the table. "Danged if that Tuck Malson is a-going to break me, that son of a murdering father!" He did some fancy oath-tossing for a moment. "He can't run me out! Not me—Ben Travis! It's him that's hired this *El Aracnido*. I know! But I got more resources 'n he suspects. Yeah!"

There was the sound of a door shutting and of bootsteps entering the house. "You put his hoss in the corral, Pete?" Travis asked. Pete muttered something in reply.

It was then the Kid realized that Travis was in such a state of mind he had been talking to himself. Downstairs, the latter went on:

"Aw, don't loose your nerve, Pete! Listen, I'm a-going to tell you something. Listen...I got a fancy gunslinger of my own on his way in—one or two of 'em—er mebbe three! You'll see...Squat and shed your gunbelt and take a slug of the forty rod, Pete."

Upstairs, the Kid shifted to get away from a bump in the cot. There was a clink and he heard something strike the floor, roll. He twisted his eyes down. In a spike of moonlight through the window he saw the gold luckpiece of Mike Burgee. Impulsively, because it was the one thing that could tie the killer to Turner's murder, he started to reach an arm for it, forgetting they were lashed behind him.

And his bound wrists moved several inches apart!

The Kid thought it was an illusion at first. But his hands were not touching now. Throwing himself into a sitting position, he worked fiercely. A rawhide thong slipped on his sore flesh. The hands parted more. He realized what had happened. When, slugged, he'd slide down on buckling legs against the rough stones of the fireplace, some of the rawhide had been cut by the friction. In another minute, one end of the pigging string snapped against his left hand. Then he was unshackled.

HE MASSAGED his hands to work out the numbness, then went to work on the bonds at his ankles. He put his freed feet softly on the floor. Now to creep downstairs and— Then his brain vetoed that. Instead, after a moment's thought, he lay back on the bed, placed his hands under him as if they were still lashed together, then called out:

"Hey, down there, I want a smoke!"

Travis threw a curse back at him. There was some talk. Next the Kid heard one of them mounting the stairs. It was Pete who pushed into the room, rolling a quirly. He sealed it, came over, stuck it in the prone Solo's mouth, then plucked a match from his hatband and struck it. Grunting as he lifted his head, the Kid wobbled the tube of tobacco

around the flame, suddenly exhaled, extinguishing the match.

"You lunkhead!" Pete growled, reached for another match.

Solo had been prepared for the fact that the hombre would not be toting a gun now. It made it a little harder for the Kid. But as Pete reached up to his hatband again, the Kid whipped around his right arm to the belly. Pete's breath came out with a *whooshing* sound. He rocked on his heels, unable to utter a sound for a few seconds, and the Kid swung to his feet with the b l a n k e t he had bunched up beside him. He flung it over the cowhand's head, blinding him. Struck furiously at his head.

Pete wavered, then toppled over the edge of the cot and slid to the floor. A slight gurgling sound came from beneath the blanket. Afer a moment, the Kid pulled it off, prepared to truss him up and gag him. It wouldn't be necessary. For a little puddle of blood was spreading in the moonbeam on the floor, welling from under the cowhand's body. He lay on his face. And when the astounded Kid rolled him over, he saw the knife rammed into the front of Pete's chest.

The story was plain. While half smothered in the blanket, the man had pulled a Bowie blade. And in crashing d o w n, half unconscious from the Kid's blows, he had fatally stabbed himself when he fell on the knife. The Kid swallowed hard, fighting off nausea. He had never meant to take the gent's life; after all, this Pete was just a tool, a hired hand.

"What're you doing up there, Pete? Holding the danged snake's head?" roared Travis from below.

Solo answered in a muffled voice that he'd. be right down. Redraping the blanket over the dead man's body, he eased down the stairs. From the front room off the hall came the rumble of Ben Travis talking to himself again. Then the scrape of the jug on the table. Solo got down in the darkness of the hall to peer in the door. Travis had the jug hoisted to his face, his back to the Kid.

THE LATTER acted swiftly. His darting eyes showed him Pete's gunbelt draped over the back of a chair just inside the door. Hooking out the stag-handled Colts, Solo slipped up behind Travis and rammed the gun nose into his back. The rancher was just lowering the jug. He sputtered curses.

"Dang you, Pete, this ain't no time for jokes er—" Then his bloodshot eyes twisted over a shoulder and he saw the Kid. Travis choked and the jug dropped onto the table with a crash. The Kid didn't have to order him to elevate his dewclaws. Travis did, unsteadily.

"You scissor bill, I ought to pay you back for slamming me around," the Kid purred from his bruised lumped-up face, "but I got more important business." Then he snapped the gun out of Travis' back and bent it forcibly over his head.

Travis started down like a pole-axed animal. The Kid h a l f caught him and let him fall into one of the chairs whose stuffing protruded. Then he put the late Pete's gun on the table, scooped up his own weapons. A few seconds later he was outside and moving around the front of the place and down the slope toward the corral. Above him the big shade trees of the front yard swished softly in the night breezes.

The Kid thought, *Indirectly, I killed that Pete upstairs. This will really be a murder charge against me this time. If they give me a catching...* He shut off the thoughts. The night had an ominous feel. Ahead, he made out his paint pony tied at the corral gate. Pete had not unsaddled the animal and put it in with the others; that was a break.

The next instant, Solo saw he was going to need a break. Hinges creaked and the door of the bunkhouse beyond the corral opened. A man in his underwear and a pair of jeans appeared in it, turned his head to say something to another inside. Solo hunched down behind a hummock of grass, praying. He had to get the hell clear of here before Travis recov-

ered consciousness, and before Pete's body was discovered.

But the man stood there, moment after precious moment, scratching his chest as he peered around. Finally he went back inside, without closing the door though. Curbing his impatience, the Kid waited. In the rear of the house, behind a shed, the windmill pumping water up from a creek, creaked away on the night. Once again, bent double, the Kid moved out. Simultaneously, as the windmill paused, he caught the unmistakable rattle of a spur chain.

His head jerked. Coming around the corner of the shed was another figure, a man with drawn smokepoles pushed before him.

"Hold it, pelican!" the man called low but commandingly.

SOLO'S bared weapon whipped around. He had to get out of this. Then a bullet was whining past his ear. He slammed that trigger. As the gun reports slapped on the night, the other jumped back around the corner of the shed. Solo made a break toward the pole corral, running hard. Muzzle flame licked from the shed corner. One slug chunked up earth just inches in front of the Kid. And as he dived groundward another hummed a vicious song a foot over his back. The jasper at the shed was a crack shot.

Up on a knee in the grass, the Kid twisted and leveled his smoke-leading gun barrel. He saw a piece of the man's sombrero. Then it was pulled back out of sight, but the extended gun crackled afresh. The Kid held his breath an instant, then let go with three shots. Wood chunks leaped from the corner of the shed. From down at the bunkhouse, a cowhand began to shout. And then the Colts of the man behind the shed jumped up into the air, out of his hand.

The hand itself thrust out, writhing with pain, and in the moonlight, the Kid distinctly saw the streak of red welling across the back of it, the blood filling a bullet furrow across that gun hand. Another man had been branded with his bullet sign. And the Kid had a brief glimpse of him as he ran from the end of the shed to duck into a stand of little cottonwoods over by the windmill. He was a skinny wisp of a man in a blue shirt. And as he bounded into the cover of the trees, his sombrero flew off to reveal long black hair that floated out behind him the way the old frontier scouts used to wear it.

There was shouting from the bunkhouse. Two cowhands, one barefooted, dashed from it. They passed the corral and headed for the main house. Then the Kid was diving flat again as another slug horneted by his head: that one had come from behind, from the trail out front.

He swung around in the high grass. One man was crouched at the other side of the road. Behind him, a few yards back, a couple of horsemen were swinging up the slope opposite the ranch-house. Solo Strant sliced out his second weapon even as gunfire from down by the bunkhouse drew his attention a moment. A rider piling along the side of it was throwing down on the two running cowhands. Solo saw he'd never reach his cayuse, that the place was pretty well ringed in.

He had no choice, if he wanted to save his hide, but to go back to the house. Jumping up he flashed like a jackrabbit around into the front yard. Up the steps of the gallery. Travis, having regained consciousness, tottered in the doorway.

"What in tarnation's going on?" he snorted.

"A bunch're raiding the place. Git inside!"

"El Aracnido!" spat out Travis.

The two cowhands came plunging up the steps. They all hustled inside as bullets chunked into the porch. One of the men gasped out that it was the Spider, *El Aracnido,* all right. Slamming shut the heavy-planked door, Travis leaned against it a moment and stared at the Kid.

"You—you came back— So you can't be one of 'em after all," he said heavily.

But there was no time to be wasted

in jaw-wagging then. Travis hurled across the parlor to a closet. He brought out boxes of shells and extra Colts. Two rifles were lifted down from the pegs over the fireplace. And then Travis, barking at one of the men to douse the lamp, began to haul the blankets down from the windows. The gunfire outside had ceased.

THE KID set himself a little back from one of the two front windows, deftly reloading his gun chambers in the dark. Travis had already sent one of the men to watch at the back door. The other one from the bunkhouse told how Solo had smoked it in with one of the other raiders who had been almost at the rear of the house.

"This ranny wounded him, too."

Travis, at the other front window, said, "Reckon you saved us, mister." He nodded in Solo's direction. "Fer the time being, leastwise. They was planning to sneak in and git me, I—"

He broke off with an exclamation, pointing. *"El Arcnido,* the mangy, lobo himself!"

Through the cracked panes of his window, the Kid had a fleeting glimpse of the man. He'd just appeared, afoot, from behind a big tree across the road. In another moment, he was gone again, swallowed in shadows. But Solo had taken in the big ant-hill-like Mex sombrero, the green gold-embroidered bolero, the white-gloved hands holding a couple of smokepoles.

Time crept along as they waited in the house. Travis kept swearing under his breath, making two hurried trips to the jug. "They'll be bellying in now, creeping close," he growled. "Then they'll slam us sudden-like from all sides, dang 'em."

Solo nodded. They'd been trying to slip in and jump the house before anybody could be warned, he realized, when he'd been slipping out. The Kid thought of the dead man upstairs. He himself was in one ugly tight. If the raiders crashed in, his light was pretty certain to be put out anyway because he'd alined himself with the defenders.

Then he stiffened. The wind was blowing out of the north-east, but he could swear he'd caught the *cloppity-clop* of hoofs. And they seemed to come from the south, down the valley. A night bird called from across the road. Then its whistle was repeated from behind the house. It was no bird; it was the signal of the Spider's bunch that they were ready.

"They'll be coming now, boss," the cowhand said.

Travis swore. "We'll hold 'em as long as we can, then go upstairs when they crash in."

The Kid caught the drum of hoofs again, stronger this time. Travis' gun crackled as he triggered nervously at some shifting shadow at the other side of the road. The man back in the kitchen called out that he could see three of them closing in behind the house. He wanted more help.

And then the Kid saw it first, saw the little band of riders that had appeared on the rise of the trail south of the ranch. One man rode out at the head of them, fully revealed in the moonlight. He sat high in the saddle, wearing a flat-brimmed sombrero.

The cowhand sighted them then. He let out a yell. "Hey, boss, it's Pinto Haid! See him? We're saved!"

6

THE KID heard it.

Then he saw *El Aracnido's* men bunch out on the trail to the right side of the rancho. They were mounting. They sat the saddles facing the group on the rise. It was obvious that neither side wanted a fight because they were too evenly matched, man for man. Nobody fired a shot. They sat looking at each other, then the Spider's bunch, on order, wheeled their ponies and headed northward.

Haid's horsemen rode down off the rise a little. Travis threw open the door and stepped out on the porch, yelling. The Kid saw it through the

window. Haid raised his arm in salute. Called: "I'll be seeing you, Ben!" Then he and his bunch turned and went back over the rise.

The Kid uncocked the hammers of his gun, realizing that Haid was Ben Travis' friend. Haid, the lobo.

Travis came back in, saying how lucky they were. "But I sure was all wrong about you, mister," he said to the Kid. "I did think you were one of the Spider's outfit."

"I ride alone," the Kid said simply, thinking of that dead man, Pete, upstairs. He had to get out of there pronto.

Travers was jubilant about running off the Spider. He kept talking, pouring copiously the meanwhile. "They can't whup me," he kept repeating. He slapped the Kid's back. "The best we got on the outfit ain't none too fitten for you, mister! The very best! Hang your headpiece here as long as you aim. But—"

Solo had already picked up his hat. "I got to be making tracks pronto, Travis," he said.

The ranchman tried to detain him. "Now, look, fella, we had a little disagreement afore, I'll admit. But—"

The Kid said, "I got business up this way, Travis."

Travis started, "I can make it worth your business to stay here a spell, mister. I can use a fast cool shooting hand like you and—"

"I came up here after a man," the Kid said bluntly. And when Travis asked him the gent's name, the Kid, playing a hunch, said it was a hombre called Burgee. He watched Travis' face closely. It was evident the name meant nothing to the cowman. He shrugged.

"Must be a newcomer to these parts," he said. "Well, there's one man in Headstone who knows anybody who moves in or out of these parts. Not that I like him much. But Professor Ambler—the gambler fella—he'd know about this Burgee if anybody in Headstone would. Still, mister, I could make you a nice offer to stay around..."

The Kid got out of there a short spell later, forking his pony in the dawn down the trail to Headstone, trying to put things together in his mind: Pinto Haid a known outlaw, who seemed to be siding this Travis: this *El Aracnido,* the Spider, apparently another lobo operating in this Smokepipe Country; Travis' contention that the latter was hired by Tuck Malson, a rival rancher. He attempted to make some kind of pattern out of it.

But by the time he turned into a little arroyo some miles down from Travis' place and unsaddled the jaded unrested paint horse, Solo gave it up. In the brush, some little distance from the picketed horse, he bedded down. That was for safety's sake. For when Travis found the dead Pete upstairs in that room where the Kid himself had been a prisoner, they'd doubtlessly take the trail after him. He'd be wanted now for that job—although he could claim justifiable self defense.

His immediate task was to catch up with Nogales Mike Burgee, whom he was convinced had slain Turner, and, too, the girl, Doris, who was his only witness to the fact he would be involved in this Smokepipe Country situation before he succeeded in solving his own problem. And of the situation here, in which Pinto Haid, Burgee's friend, was mixed up, he could make neither head nor tail; perhaps this Professor Ambler, the gambler, could give him the key.

Before he shut his eyes, Solo thought of that last man on whom he'd inscribed his bullet brand, the wisplike member of the Spider's pack. That carried him back to the assassin who'd slain Turner through the boarded-up window whom Solo had wounded in like manner, carried him back to that and the ten-dollar goldpiece, the luckcharm, which he'd found in the yard of the house after the ruthless slaying. Those last two facts were the only thing he had to go on. Solo Strant knew his chances of success were slight; and he was a hunted man himself in the bargain.

With those thoughts, he dozed off...

IT WAS toward nightfall that day when he rode into the range town of Headstone. He timed it advisedly for nightfall because he realized by now he might well be a marked man—marked for two killings.

He came riding down the wide stage trail that hit the bridge over the river to the bustling sprawled cow-town. The firefly-like glimmer of coal-oil lamps from the town was already spilling over the prairie swells. With him was a grubline rider who was quitting the Smokepipe Country. He was a bunkhouse hand. Needed the work and forty plus beans per month. But he was getting out, because as he told the Kid:

"They's only looking for cartridge-free men in this strip of range now. Gents who're as slick with a short-gun as they are with a loop, the former being more important. In other words, fighting cowhands. Me, I've had my belly full of fights in my day. I just aim to live and mebbe-so build me enough of a bankroll to get my own little outfit some day...."

He went on about it. There was hell building over the grazing lands of the Smokepipe, he predicted. First off, there was Pinto Haid's outfit that was causing a heap of trouble. Then there was this Spider gent and his handful of trigger slammers. Spoiling for trouble, it seemed. And then there was the trouble between Travers and Tuck Malson of the Box-M. The Box-M was the big wealthy outfit of the valley.

"Fenceline trouble, I reckon," the Kid suggested to keep his informant talking.

The other, a lanky gent by the handle of Quinby, eyed him, then spat a tobacco-yellowed stream into the roadside brush. "Heap worse 'n that, mister. It was what started the trouble a-biling in these parts. Travis' paw disappeared some years back. He was a heavy gambler. Lost a heap to Old Man Malson over the card tables. Cash, and cow stuff, and land. It was what made the Box-M big an' strong and the Travis spread just a two-bit outfit. Then, the elder Travis—Ben's paw—he plumb up and vanished." He paused to gnaw off another chunk of eating tobacco.

"I sabe," the Kid said.

"Like hell, you do, pilgrim," said the dour Quinby. He expectorated again as he swayed to the motion of his roan. "Coupla months back they had a touch of drought in this country. Wells began to run dry and feeder creeks dried up. One well in particular. Yes-siree." He stopped talking.

They were opposite a rundown little barroom just before the bridge that spanned the river into the town. On a hunch, Solo suggested they drop off for some gila sweat to irrigate their tonsils, him buying of course. Quinby growled reluctantly but dropped off. They left their ponies at the hitchrail and went in. Over a couple of snorts of forty rod, Quinby talked some more. Wells had gone dry, he said. And one in particular.

That was the one back on the old rancho of the elder Malson, the well behind the little house that had been burnt out after Old Man Malson had built his dobie cow baron's palace. The Old Man was now dead and gone, of course. And in the dried-up well of the abandoned place, a wandering rider had discovered a body, a man who'd been shot and then, apparently, pitched into it. The corpse was hauled out and identified as Tex Travis, Ben's father, who'd supposedly ridden out of the country years back.

THERE WAS nothing to be done, nobody to prosecute with Old Man Malson dead. But the discovery of the body had started this new trouble. Travis claimed that the younger Tuck Malson wanted to gobble up the whole country as his dad had absorbed other outfits around him, that he had a band of hired gunhands under a lobo who was seeking to drive out the smaller brands so

their outfits could be taken off at two-bit prices.

"Hell's a-going to tip up on its end and spill over into the Smokepipe country, mister," he concluded. "So that's why I'm making' tracks out They's going to be blood-letting aplenty afore it's over."

Solo nodded thoughtfully. A heap of it still didn't make sense to him. He purchased another pair of drinks for them both. Quinby was getting fairly well liquored, in a boastful mood as to showing off his information.

The Kid said casually, "This Professor Ambler, has he got any chips in the pot?"

Quinby got a wary look. "The Professor, he knows everything that goes on, I reckon."

"Just a local gambler, eh."

Quinby cocked an eyebrow over the last half of his drink. "Mister, you don't know nothing. Ambler the gambler is the richest man in Headstone. Owns more 'n half of it, I reckon. He's known as the 'Honest Gambler.' Claims he don't have to be crooked 'cause he can whip anybody playing it straight. And from what I hear—that means *anybody*. The Prof is a smart un."

"Where'll I find him in town?"

"Any where. The Prof don't play less'n he feels like it. Just when he does. He—uh—" Then Quinby shut up as if to bite off his tongue, as if he realized he'd been talking too much.

"I aim to see him. I want some information 'bout a gent I've cold-trailed into this country," the Kid said bluntly. He figured the cowhand was orey-eyed enough to talk freely. And any information he could pick up now might save him a heap of trouble later. "I reckon this Professor likes to git paid for information."

Quinby emptied his glass, sleeved off his tobacco-stained mustache, shrugged. "Really don't know a heap about the hombre," he said with an evasive look. "Got to traipse along now, stranger. I'll see you sometime." He went out hurriedly.

7

A FEW MINUTES later, the Kid was riding across the bridge into Headstone alone. Darkness had fallen and the night life of the lusty sprawling range town was moving into full swing. Hat pulled low, he sloped up the main drag, practically ignored in the milling crowds. Sometimes they bellied out from the wooden sidewalks and halted traffic in the dusty street.

There were stores, still open. Whiskey mills, one after the other. Honky tonks. The bank on one of the main corners was closed. It was about the only thing in prosperous Headstone that seemed to be. There was a big white hotel with a double-decked gallery and a sign that proclaimed it the "Smokepipe House." A stagecoach had just arrived there and a curious crowd heaved around it.

Cowmen, gamblers, prospectors in hobnailed boots down from the hills, townsmen in city-style suits, all jostled along the sidewalks with women interspersing them. Fancy women leaned from windows, from the doorways of the honky tonks, inviting customers inside. Barkers stood under the coal-oil torches at entrances, talking a mile a minute to entice customers inside. A lamp flared over the tailboard of a covered wagon in an empty lot where some patent medicine salesman was beguiling a crowd with the merits of a cure-all nostrum he was peddling.

There was a gunshot. A slight melee in the double doorway of a barroom. Then a man came flying out, skidding backward down the steps on his heels, blood spurting from his forehead. And at the top of the steps stood a barkeep in flour-sack apron brandishing a bungstarter that was

now red-stained. The victim, still clutching a smoking gun, collapsed in the ragweed of the gutter. A moment or so later, the crowd was seething past him, and music was again issuing from the barroom where the fracas had occurred.

Solo Strant smiled thinly from the saddle. He had seen these scenes many times before, had seen many such bustling cowtowns in the throes of growth; yet the picture never ceased to fascinate him. It was the American Western frontier in one stage of its expansion, lusty, raucous, violent, a great growing child that didn't know its own strength. Roughshod in its methods, perhaps. Crude. Often savage. But still the typical outposts of a new nation in the building....

HE ROUNDED a slight bend in the broad main line. There was another hotel, *The Longhorn*, with an ornate bar attached to it. Just as the Kid drew abreast, a tall handsome man in expensive pearl-gray clothes and with curly black hair came reeling from the entrance. Two cowhands were trying to support him toward a buckboard at the hitchrail. A couple of laughing dance-hall girls followed, scooping up the bills the handsome one strewed from his pockets. The throng on the sidewalk parted to make way for him.

"Young Tuck Malson—the witless fool—blind orey-eyed *agin*," said a rider who'd reined up beside the Kid.

"Again?" the Kid picked him up.

"Sure," the rider said. "He hits town, puts up at the hotel, and is orey-eyed for nights in a row. They tell me he does plenty of drinking out at the ranch, too. Gawd knows he don't seem to give a hoot about the outfit." The man spat disgustedly into the dust.

The Kid cocked an eyebrow. That hardly fitted into the picture of a man charged with wanting to gobble up the little outfits on the range. The Kid swung abreast of the other rider as they both moved on.

"Say, I'm a-looking for Professor Ambler, the gambler. Got any idea where'd be the best place to find him."

The man cut his eyes sharply at the Kid, taking in his rig. "Try the Fifth Ace. 'S down in the next block," he said.

The *Fifth Ace* was a big ornate place with a huge bar. Well thronged with roulette tables already clicking in the rear and the chant of the faro dealers rising over the hubbub. The Kid bought a drink at the bar, asked the drink wrangler if the Professor was around. The man shrugged and said he didn't know, said he'd try to find out.

Some minutes passed. The barkeep paid the Kid no more heed. Then a house man in plain black with a pistol stuck in his waistband touched the Kid's elbow. In the bar mirror Solo had seen the gent surreptitiously studying him from behind.

"Looking for the Professor?" the house guard said. "Well, stranger, you might try the *El Dorado*. Up the next side road. Ain't saying you'll find him there but...."

Before he went there, Solo left his paint horse at a livery barn to be grained and groomed. The *El Dorado* was another gambling hell, smaller and less ornate than the *Fifth Ace*—but the routine was almost the same. He bought a snort of red-eye, inquired for this Professor again. The bar boss said he hadn't seen him but that he'd ask around. A few minutes and a pot-bellied man in a grease-stained frock coat sidled up to the Kid. He looked like the proprietor of the place.

"The Professor left here a while back, mister. Reckon you might come across him at *Big Joe's* place though. Mebbe...."

Big Joe's proved to be a raucous honky tonk with music and a bevy of hard-eyed, painted-faced girls. Again, after the Kid's query, a house guard suggested another place—the hotel

barroom this time. He didn't say positively that the Professor would be there. As none of them had. Just that the gambler king, the man who could not be beaten with cards, might be there.

The Kid was getting disgusted as he moved along the main line. This Professor was one danged elusive figure. He hadn't missed one thing: when the various gents had spoken of the Professor, there had been a heap of respect in their voices. Awe, even. Then—Solo had the sudden sensation he was being followed.

It was hard to tell in the jostling crowd on the sidewalk. The Kid drifted over beside the steps of a closed store. After a minute a squat man with a flat-crowned fawn sombrero came along. Solo remembered him as having trailed him into Big Joe's place. But the gent stalked by without so much as cutting his eyes at the Kid. The Kid knew now that he was being watched. As he proceeded on to the hotel, he loosened his hoglegs in their holsters.

In the richly appointed hotel barroom, he didn't even have to ask. He'd just bellied up to the counter when a little pointed-faced man in a store suit stepped up beside him.

"Best place to find the Professor is the *Sage Bar*—at this time," he muttered. Then he blew smoke from his stogie and moved off.

The Kid cursed under his breath. Already something told him this Professor might be a difficult man to deal with, that he might put a price on his information. But Solo went out, learned the *Sage Bar* was up the side road from the bank corner. He was just turning the corner there when a lounger called out, half unbelievingly: "Hey, ain't that the Silver Kid? The Kid what killed that U.S. marshal back in—" The rest of it was lost in the hubbub of the main street.

The Kid darted around a buckboard standing in the ditch, slid across the side road and eased into the shadows of a big eucalyptus. Then he walked swiftly into an alley, too smart to run and draw attention to himself. Word of the charge and that he was wanted, he realized, had probably come into Headstone by telegraph. He cursed softly, moved out of the back end of the alley, and worked around to emerge further down the side road. It slanted down to a branch of the river that snaked along the edge of the lower part of the town.

THERE WERE fewer lights down here though the new risen moon was bright. Then he saw the sign reading *Sage Bar* spiking from the porch of a ramshackle place. It was a smoky, low-ceiled dive with a single lamp hung from the ceiling, dim and reeking of sour beer, spilled whiskey and a dampness. Three men slouched at the bar behind which a huge fat man wheezed with every move. It seemed a strange place for a rich top-hand gambler to hang his hat.

Again Solo Strant went through the ritual of buying a drink and asking for the Professor. But this time the barkeep simply ignored him, turning his back to take Solo's money down to the cigar box he used as a till. One of the Kid's hands went to his throat, to that little silver skull there.

He interpreted the gesture as one of plain impatience instead of an omen of approaching danger that time. He was getting belly-sick of playing this will of the wisp game. Then the flutter of sharply riffled cards broke upon the stillness. Solo came around fast.

Back in a dim corner—too dark to see to play cards—sat a slight figure in a gray frock coat, a flowered waistcoat, and with a stovepipe hat cocked jauntily on his head. The Kid knew at once this was the famed Professor, at last. What he couldn't understand was how he'd gotten there. For Solo knew Professor Ambler had not been there when he himself entered the whiskey mill.

"You wanted to see me, stranger?" the Professor said in precise English. His head moved and Solo saw that he wore spectacles. "You—"

"Look out!" yelped one of the men at the bar, staring at the open doorway. "He—"

Gunfire ripped into the place from the weapons of the man crouched outside. Pure spleen was stamped on his beard-stubbled face as he rode those triggers. And the streams of lead slanted right for the Professor over in the corner....

8

THE JASPER who'd shouted the warning cleared holster leather first, but his shots were high. And then the deadly Silver Kid had swung into action. With that diabolically swift cross-arm draw, he had his left weapon slashing up in his right hand, had it talking. One of the other gents at the bar chimed in with a bone-handled .45. The reports smashed off the low ceiling like reverberating thunder.

The Kid knew it was his shot that first got the man out on the sagging porch. Struck in the leg, the killer swayed over lopsidedly. Caught himself and limped backward. Somebody else's slug flashed him in the ribs and one of his spitting guns dropped. Then he wheeled and ran off the porch. Solo dashed to the doorway.

The would-be assassin was hobbling at a drunken run toward a couple of waiting horses down the road toward the side creek. A slight rider sat the kak of one. Solo bawled to the hit man to halt, triggered again when he didn't. He hadn't even meant to hit him, just to scare him into halting. But the leg-wounded fugitive lurched full into the flight of the bullet.

It took him between the shoulders, lifted him from the ground. He flopped into the dust like a jack-rabbit with a broken neck. At once the rider with the two waiting ponies threw home the spur steel, bolted away, and went splashing through the shallow waters of the side creek. Two of the men who'd rushed from the bar after Solo threw lead at that one. But in vain.

The taller one dropped down beside the one who'd tried to burn down the Professor, rolled him over. "Dead," he said curtly. "Dammit! Now we can't make him rattle his tongue and tell who sent him." He twisted his head up to stare with suspicion at the Kid.

The latter didn't see the look, for he was staring across the side creek at the long sand bank stretching up on the other side of it. The saddle pard of the dead man had slowed to twist around in the saddle a moment, hat dropped back on shoulders. The Kid couldn't be sure at that distance in the moonlight—but it looked suspiciously like the yellow hair of Doris Holt.

THE MAN kneeling over the corpse rose and snapped a match to the cigar stub in his mouth. He dropped the still lighted match into the road, and then the Kid knew it *had* been Doris Holt out there with the gunman. For in the match glare he saw the stub of one of those Red Star cigarettes in the dust. His mouth jerked open.

"That was a woman with—" he began.

Men began to emerge from the few places around to see what had happened. The third gunman from the *Sage Bar* ordered them back brusquely. "Some stranger just got drygulched from an alley. We saw it," he said. "Stay back there! Don't git too danged nosey." And they obeyed.

The taller one smoking the cigar nodded as the Kid slid his weapons back into the holsters. "Better keep 'em penned there, fella."

The Kid was baffled. Then the gun of the second one prodded him in the back. "Easy does it—and you last

longer," he said.

"What the hell?" the Kid spat softly. After all he was the first one to wound the snake who'd been trying to burn down the Professor.

"We ain't so all-fired dumb," the cigar smoker told him. "When you saw he'd missed and was wounded and might git caught—you drilled him dead center so he couldn't tell nothin', mebbe."

"Are you locoed?" the Kid demanded, eyes sleepy with that dangerous look.

"Let's go back and see the boss," the one with the cigar said shrugging. "You could uh led that snake to the Professor. It'd been a slick trick. Very, very slick."

Back inside the mangy little barroom, the Professor was calmly collecting the cards of the deck that had been sprayed on the floor when he glided up from the table. "Know who it was?" he asked in that precise mild and emotionless voice.

They told him they d i d n' t. "Hmmm." He picked his stovepipe hat from the table. There was a neat bullet hole high through the crown. The Professor ran a hand over his sleek black hair as if to make sure it was all still there, then redonned the hat meticulously and straightened his spectacles.

"We figured this jasper could uh led him here," one of the gun guards said.

The Professor pocketed his cards, then ran his eyes over the Kid. He took in the rusty black rig, the silver trappings, unhurriedly. And the Kid had a chance to study this mystery man, this king gambler who was said to own half the range town.

Professor Ambler was slim, narrow-shouldered, taller than the Kid himself. He had a sallow face, plain, with vague brown eyes behind the glasses. The Kid could see that between the latter and his mild unimpassioned manner he had logically come to the handle of the Professor. Outside of his rich gambler's garb, he was as nondescript as some circuit-riding school master.

Then the gambler was shaking his head in response to the gunman's suggestion Solo had attempted to stage a double cross. "No-o, I don't think so.... You wanted to see me about something?" he said to Solo.

"I'm looking for a man who fled from the Law into the Stovepipe Country, amigo," Solo told him. "I've been told you'd know where any gent coming into these parts would be."

The Professor rubbed his upper lip with a long pale finger thoughtfully. "We can talk more privately in back." He turned and opened a door into a rude little room behind the bar. Led the way in. One of the gunmen had his weapon boring the Kid's spine as they entered after the gambler.

THERE WAS a greasy-topped table and a couple of chairs. With a courtly wave of his hand, the gambler offered one to the Kid, then seated himself. "The man you're after?" he asked in that strikingly modulated tone.

The Kid told him about Nogales Mike Burgee. How he'd slain a deputy back at Burchard Crossing, was being hunted down by the Law, including Link Turner the U.S. marshal. And then Turner had been burned down. The Kid told how he was certain Burgee had done that slaying too, told about the luckpiece of Burgee's he had found. And how the girl, Doris Holt, had been kidnapped by the killer.

"I have reason to believe he was headed in here to join up with the Pinto Haid bunch. Haid's Burgee's brother-in-law, they tell," the Kid finished.

"I know that," the Professor said casually as he put a match to a slim extra-long black cigar. "I know.... And you want to find this Burgee, eh?" He exhaled long streamers of blue smoke, relaxed, air bored.

The Kid uncrossed his arms from his chest. It might have looked like the start of that deadly crossarm draw. The gunman at the side of the box-like room barked a gutteral warning. The gambler made a plucking motion toward one of his coat lapels. And the next instant a wicked little double-barrelled derringer was staring the Kid in the face. Solo sat with his hands on the edge of the table, and he laughed at them quietly.

"If I'd *meant* to draw, gentleman, you'd have been too danged late," he said.

The Professor's eyes were the same mild brown, but his mouth was two close-locked lipless lines. "I don't think so. I never play unless I know I'll win.... Some day we might see."

Solo shrugged, aware of the cold sparklike tension that existed between them in that moment. "I've no quarrel with you, Ambler. I want Nogales Mike Burgee."

The derringer had disappeared as if by magic. The gambler drew thoughtfully on his cigar. "Strant, you're formally accused by the Law of killing Marshal Link Turner. There's already a two thousand reward posted for you—dead or alive. How do I know you didn't do it?"

Solo's trap-fast brain was working fast. The Professor knew who he was, had evidently known before he appeared. He'd been marked and spotted and trailed from the time he'd inquired for the gambler in that first place, *The Fifth Ace*. This Professor plainly kept himself well-guarded by a web of watchful hombres.

The Kid said, "What would I be after Burgee for if it wasn't to clear myself?"

The gambler blew more smoke. "It would be a smart trick, slicker than slobbers. Burgee is a wanted killer anyway. You give him a catching, shoot him, then hang the Turner affair on him because everybody knows Turner was hunting him anyway.... I don't know."

The Kid stood up. "All right. I thought I could get help from you. Folks told me you were a big jasper—and a straight one. But—"

The Professor interrupted, voice smooth as silk. "And I don't think you'd better go anyway.... Not right now."

"No-o?" The Kid's voice was a purr, but a purr with an undertone as lethal-sounding as the rattle of a sidewinder. Still, that tall gunman had him covered with a cocked weapon.

"No," said the Professor. "Word's around the town that you're here. They'll be looking for you. Moreover, there's a posse scouting around to the south as well. The whole range'll be on the lookout. That reward is—dead or alive. And men are greedy, Mr. Strant, very greedy."

"I can take care of myself," the Kid said between his teeth.

"In Headstone—I run things, Mr. Strant. Please remember that."

THE KID kept his temper check-reined and ignored that last. "Why aren't you turning me in, then?"

The Professor shrugged. "Because I'm not convinced that you're guilty. In a day or two, I'll know. Then—perhaps I'll help you with the information you want on Burgee. Perhaps then I'll be able to tell you where Pinto Haid, his brother-in-law, holes up. It's the wisest thing to do. Hole up. Mike'll take you to a little cabin out here in the brush. And you can wait."

The Kid realized it was sort of a Mexican standoff. He was virtually the Professor's prisoner at the moment. The man had every right, legally to shoot him or to turn him in. He wasn't doing either, now—and he might choose to help, to learn where Haid's hideout and Burgee were. That could save him, Solo realized, long days of cold-trailing and scouring of the Smokepipe Country. The Kid nodded reluctantly.

"Maybe you're right, Professor. I'll git my horse."

The gambler shook his sleek head. He was again ruefully inspecting the bullet hole in his stovepipe hat. "No good. The town peace officer and two deputies are watching that feed barn right now, waiting for you to appear."

Solo admired the man at the moment. The Professor seemed to know everything that was happening before it did happen. The gambler rose, adding: "You won't need a horse.... It's only a short way out. And by the way, Mr. Strant, I wish you wouldn't try to shoot either of my men...." He smiled bleakly. "I can still help you—or hurt you.... I'd prefer to help."

They went out the back door of the place. Down through some scrub growth on a path leading to the side creek, Solo and the tall one, Mike, and another gunman following. For once the Kid hesitated on the verge of a decision. He wasn't certain whether to make a break at the first opportunity, or to wait, to see if Professor Ambler would help. The Kid was impressed by the man's power. The gambler was plainly far more than a lucky tinhorn.

The range night was growing chilly as they crossed the wide but shallow river branch on a series of stepping-stone boulders. On the other side, they went through a notch in the sand bank, came out in heavy brush country. There was a faint cowpath and they followed that, winding and doubling. Soon the glow of lights from Headstone were lost. But it was much farther than the gambler had implied.

BY THE time they'd walked an hour, the Kid's feet ached in his high-heeled boots. Then, by a chunk of boulder, the second said he would wait there to be sure they were not followed. The Kid and Mike proceeded around a sharp bend between walls of heavy brush, dropped down suddenly. They were in a tiny hollow. And the moon's rays vaguely revealed the outline of a little tumble-down shack among some cottonwoods.

It was dirt-floored with a couple of Teton pole bunks covered with tattered blankets. There was a table and a couple of boxes for chairs, Solo saw when Mike fired up the candle anchored in the top of a can. Mike went over to a shelf, reached behind a sack of something and produced a bottle of redeye and a couple of tin cups.

"We'll git some grub out here come morning," he said, pouring drinks. He seemed to have no thought of the Kid trying to make his escape.

They drank. The Kid built himself a tube of Durham and sat on the edge of a bunk and tried to make talk. But Mike, seated on a box, was noncommittal. Refused to talk at all about his boss. The Kid kept building smokes, thinking, waiting for the second man to come down. But as the night wore away, Solo realized he wasn't going to come. He was posted up there on the back trail in this brush jungle as a guard—against escape. And if the Kid did jump Mike, without a pony, where else was there for him to go?

"That Professor is slicker 'n slobbers," he conceded to himself before rolling up in one of the damp blankets. He might as well catch some shuteye. There was nothing else to do but wait. Aside from anything else he was sure to be pretty safe out here....

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep. But when his eyes did spring open at the noise he saw at once the tired gray wash of the pre-dawn through the paneless cabin window. Then he saw Mike falling across one of the boxes as a figure in the doorway stood over him with clubbed gun. The Kid struggled to get at his own weapons in the double gunbelts he had laid just under the edge of the bunk before turning in.

It seemed as if somebody must have moved them. Then there were two-three other men in the doorway, covering him with Colts barrels that gleamed dully in the half light. As

the Kid sat up, tossing off the blanket, one of them said:

"Don't make a play for it, Silver Kid! We got you jumped!.... Git your danged boots on. We're moving."

9

THERE WAS little for the Kid to do but obey. As he drew on his cold stiff boots he saw his gunbelts and silver-stocked weapons on the second box some yards away. Even as he figured on springing for them, one of the men stepped over Mike's unconscious body and scooped them up. Told the Kid to hustle it up, calling him by name again.

The Kid was iron-nerved. But some cold sweat leaked down the back of his shirt now. Because he figured this was a posse, a pack of manhunters who'd somehow learned where he was holed up. Solo silently cursed the Professor. It could be a double-cross, too; maybe the gambler had decided to sell him out for the reward dinero.

He went outside into the half-born day with the sound of moisture dripping from the brush. There were three of them. They led him up the other side of the hollow in the opposite direction to that by which he'd come in with Mike. At the top there were four ponies. One of them lashed the Kid's hands in front of him with a pigging string, then hooked that onto the saddle horn when he was mounted. In a matter of moments they were riding along the meandering brush jungle trail—but away from Headstone.

That surprised the Kid; it wasn't the logical direction for a posse to take.

Riding at a steady clip, they left the brush, traversed open range beyond the river branch, then turned into the rough foothills on the west flank of the Smokepipe Country as the sun rose. They climbed, stopped for a breather at a small bubbling creek up in the timber. The disgusted Kid asked one of the men where they were taking him; he'd paid little attention to them thus far. Because he was danged mad at himself.

A wanted hombre himself, he was on the hunt for the man he was plumb certain had done the killing with which he was charged. Nogales Mike Burgee. Yet he had barely gotten close to the man. Since then—and with a price on his head now—he'd been practically a captive himself. Gotten exactly nowhere. Burgee, doubtless with Pinto Haid now, must be laughing at him. Thinking it was as easy to dupe the Kid, to hang the deadwood of a killing charge on him, as to shoot fish in a barrel. Solo fumed with impatience; he craved to get to work at cutting Burgee's sign.

"Where're you snakes taking me?" he threw at the stringy one of the party.

"Coyote Town," the man snapped back. "And don't ask no more damnfool questions."

The Kid had heard of the place, northwest of big prosperous Headstone, on the fringe of the Stovepipe Country. It was a warren, a mangy little settlement of human packrats back in the hills: the saloon bums who had been run out of Headstone; broken-down gunmen; drunkards; saddle tramps. The ragtag and bobtail, the no-goods, men who'd been broken, yellow coyotes who wanted to hide their shame. That was Coyote Town, a collection of hovels and whiskey mills and two-legged rats, the breed of men so unimportant they weren't even bothered by the Law.

The Kid couldn't figure that at all.

The lapping of the horses in the stream ceased. "Let's git pushing," said the little leader. In the clear light Solo took a look at him for the first time, and recognized him.

It was the little wisp of a man with the long flowing hair he'd duelled with out at Travis' place, the man who'd been creeping up behind the shed when Solo had been about to

make his escape. The man on whom he'd put his bullet brand. Solo's eyes jumped to the tiny gent's right hand. Sure enough, a soiled bandage was ringed around the back of it.

He glanced up and his eyes met the little tiny blue holes that were the eyes of the wispy one, Grady. And the Kid saw that the man knew him from Travis' place too.

They pushed on through the broken timbered country, winding along the spines of hogback ridges, dropping into side valleys. Then they emerged from one onto a rough wagon trail. And about high noon, under a fierce sun, they passed through a little cut into Coyote Town.

Solo Strant scarcely saw it. Because now he knew who had him as prisoner. The men of *El Aracnido*, the Spider, who'd raided Travis' place that night. That night that seemed ages ago now. He was the captive of another, the second, of the outlaw bands operating in the Stovepipe Country.

The settlement itself could hardly be called that. It was something that even coyotes would pass up. A collection of tumble-down drunken-leaning shacks and hovels, a former ghost town from the days when the prospectors had come into the old Stovepipe land seeking gold. Scattered out over a baked bit of plain with a creek with a trickle of water straggling down its bed. Paintless. Places with broken windows rag-stuffed. With roofs sagging over corners. It emanated a feeling of living death.

A single crowbait, ribs almost bare, stood midway down the sandy street. Two men dragged themselves listlessly along it like derelicts on a desert. As they rode by what had once been a little store, the Kid saw a drunken man sprawled sleeping in the open doorway the while a yellow-spotted mongrel sniffed around him. He suddenly had a feeling of defeat himself. It seemed now as if he would never catch up to Burgee.

AS THEY turned down a lane with a few stunted trees, he remembered Doris Holt last night. How he'd seen her riding off after the attempt on the Professor's life. That baffled him completely. Evidently, though, she had escaped from Burgee. And that was another of the maddening things; if he could have overtaken her then, he would have had a witness to the fact somebody else had slain Link Turner back there at Broken Butte. But those chunk-head gun guards of the gambler had to hold him.

"Here we are," Grady said. They pulled up at a little ramshackle house with its porch almost falling off down at the edge of the sour-looking creek. Dismounted. One of them started to lead the ponies to the shed in the rear. The other three escorted Solo into the house that was like an oven under that fierce sun. A little gila monster scuttled away as they went in the door.

The man who'd been toting the Kid's weapons stepped forward to put them down on a table. "Mighty fancy hardware our friend totes," he remarked, hefting one of the Kid's prized guns.

And the Kid, desperate by the conditions that Fate seemed to have lined up to frustrate him, saw his chance. The man's own stag-handled Colts protruded from his right thigh, no arm there to block it off. One of the other two had gone back into the kitchen, talking about getting some grub. And the wispy Grady was over to one side, mopping his forehead and neck the while he held his flat-crowned sombrero in the other hand.

Even though his hands were lashed, the Kid leaped, hooked at the gun butt protruding from that breed style holster. He got it out and was struggling to cock it. It happened with the speed of a thunder clap. Grady's sombrero spun across the room and struck the Kid in the face, momentarily blinding him, and the tiny Grady

rushed right into the gun the Kid held.

It crashed off. There was the spatter of shattered glass; then the wisp of a man hit the manacled, still-blinded Kid like a wildcat. Solo chopped once with the hogleg at the gunman who'd whipped around from the table; then the weapon flew from his awkward grasp. He fought like a berserk animal himself.

He kicked, clubbed with his lashed hands, but that danged Grady simply mounted him, ignoring a heavy double-handed blow to the face. They hit the floor, rolled, thrashing about. And then the third one, who'd rushed in from the kitchen, brought the skillet he held down on the Kid's bared head in a crashing blow. Daylight disappeared for Solo Strant....

WHEN HE came to, he realized some hours had passed. He could tell by the way the sun's rays slanted through the window. They were weaker now and the day was cooler. Vaguely he knew he'd been half conscious for some while. Now he fought slowly out of the stupor. It had been a heavy blow.

He was stretched on a cot. When he turned his head he could see blood stains on the blanket beside his ear. Voices reached him from the front room. Then the door opened and little Grady came in.

"Thought I heard you a-stirring, Strant.... Here." He came across the room with a tin mug of forty rod whiskey. "Plumb sorry we had to whack you so hard, but you was worse than a young bull at branding time."

As the Kid worked the whiskey down his dry throat, past mashed lips, he heard a man in front say, "Dang these no-good matches! The—" And then the voice tacked on a string of imprecations and epithets that would have made a mule skinner prick up his ears hungrily for knowledge.

Grady pulled a Bowie knife from his waistband. "Now listen an' have some sense, Strant. When I free your dewclaws, don't start no more one-man stampedes. You ain't a-going to git hurt. But the boss is here, and he's danged quick-tempered. Sabe?" He slashed the Kid's bonds.

When Solo first stood up, he rocked. But after a moment the redeye worked into his veins and he was able to walk into the front room. The other three were lounging around there. And there was a fourth man. *El Aracnido,* the Kid saw at once. The Spider himself.

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SOLO recognized him from the Mex anthill-style sombrero, pushed back on his head now, and from the green-embroidered bolero. Recognized him from seeing him during the raid on Travis' rancho. He was a dirty sloppy looking man, and the Kid's second impression was that, somehow, somewhere, he'd met him before. Yet Solo *knew* he never had.

El Aracnido was sprawled in a chair, dusty boots shoved out in front of him. He was taller than Solo, not big, but fairly thick bodied. A beard stubble hedged his face that was grimy as well. He squinted out of brown eyes. One hand held a burning brown paper cigarette; the other was scratching the front of his ragged dishevelled black hair, a mop of it. Both hands were dirty with the finger nails in mourning, they were so black. He chewed on a toothpick.

"Howdy, Strant, ya lowdown no-good murderin'—" And then he tacked on some obscene epithets. The Spider was always cursing, Solo was to learn. But he tossed off the epithets this time in an almost friendly way so there was no cause to take offense. "Put your britches in a chair, Strant. Doc, git him another swig of the redeye."

The Kid was glad to sit down. He took the proffered drink, then built himself a tube of Durham. His head was spinning from moving; wild horses chased each other around in-

side his skull. But his senses were clear enough to show him that the hombre called *El Aracnido* was no Mexican. A breed perhaps, but there was plenty of white blood in him. And the Kid could not shed the feeling of somehow knowing the man,

"Our guest, the—" And the Spider did some more fancy two-fisted cursing, scratching that unruly mop of hair. "—he don't look so happy to be here." Then he spat out the toothpick and leaned forward.

Eyes lidded, somnolent-looking though the kid was, he was studying this man intently. That voice had a note that dully rang a chord of familiarity in his mind too. The Spider said: "Let's get down to business, Strant. They's two thousand on your head. I can use two thousand dollars, by grab. Two thousan'!" He snapped his grimy fingers and his eyes rolled expressively. "But—I can use you too. I can use your danged guns."

The Kid shook his head negatively. "I don't ride with lobos, mister."

"You want your neck stretched, huh?" Some more oaths.

Solo finished off his drink, knowing he couldn't run this bluff too far. Doc, the tall one with the birdlike face, got up and went out to the kitchen from which cooking smells emanated. They were good smells too. In really looking over this little bunch for the first time, with the exception of the Spider himself, he noticed that they weren't the usual type of lobo. They didn't have that coldly vicious gun-wolf stamp on them. They looked tough, efficient—but not of the breed who lived by the gun.

"Look, Strant, yuh ol'—" Some more epithets. "You hate lobos. Sure, I know your rep. You like to fight 'em. Well—I'm fighting one of 'em—a big one. Pinto Haid." The Spider sat back and reached inside his bolero and inside a stained checkered shirt to scratch his chest.

The Kid straightened a little in his chair, smiled thinly. Pinto Haid. This might be a break for him, after all, at last. Burgee was undoubtedly with Pinto Haid now. Solo would not have preferred it this way, but at least, it offered a chance; and the Spider *could* turn him into the Law.

"What's the deal, Spider?"

"Ride with me, Strant, till I break Haid—and the man behind him... Then you'll be free. Till then, I own your guns. Sabe? Otherwise, I turn you in."

Cannily, the Kid sucked on his quirly for a few moments. Then he nodded at the Spider. "She's a deal, mister."

The Spider got out of the chair and came over and put out his hand. "All right. But remember. Till then, *I—own—your—Colts.*"

THEY HAD a good dinner, steaks and fried potatoes and cackle berries that had been produced from somewhere. Doc was a good cook. There was plenty of java afterward—and java that was a far cry from the gray gullywash stuff a man got in so many eating places and bunkhouses.

The Kid had a query as a game of stud started up. He noticed that the Spider didn't sit in—though, earlier, when the man had taken out a pack of those brown paper smokes, with them he'd pulled a deck of cards halfway from a pocket of his strained shiny gray pants.

"Spider, how do you know I won't take a powder and slip out at the first chance? Or that I won't jump you fellas and—"

The Spider laughed sharply. Again the Kid had the feeling he somehow knew this squint-eyed man. "Naw, Kid, ya old—" Some more of the ripe epithets blued the air. "I know 'bout you. You're one of them kinda chunkheads who keep your dang word when you give it."

The Kid turned in early. His skull still ached painfully though the grub had helped. He fell off to sleep almost at once.

The next day dragged interminably in drab Coyote Town. There was no sun. The sky was an inverted leaden bowl that clamped down on the sultry atmosphere. It boiled the moisture through a man's hide, made him feel as if he were sitting on a sheet iron stove. The men slept most of the time, played a few games of cards.

But there was little of the drinking, the jugpassing the Kid had found typical of lobo outfits when they were not in action.

Once he walked into the house to find the Spider playing a game of solitaire. He watched the game. Something about the way the man's grimed brown hands casually flipped the cards about fascinated him. The lobo boss saw him watching, dropped a couple of cards on the floor, then quit the game.

"Hell with that blankety-blank game," he spat out in that uncouth manner. "No fun in a man's cheating himself. Me, ha, when I play cards, I always try to cheat. She's part of the game."

The Kid digested that, wondering. He asked, "Spider, how do you aim to beat this Haid? He's got a plumb big outfit from what I heard tell."

A crafty evasive look crossed the lobo boss' face. "Leave that to me, Strant. I—I got plans." His mouth, behind the beard stubble, became grim, terribly ruthless. He fired up one of those ready-made brown paper cigarets and sucked it down hard.

A pony came down the lane, stopped in front of the house. Immediately the other four were up, slicking guns out out of holsters. But the Spider said he recognized the bare-footed breed boy who dropped out of the saddle. The latter came to the door, handed the Spider a note. The latter gave him some coins and the young breed rode off.

The Spider came back into the room, squinting at the handwriting on the ragged piece of brown paper he'd unfolded. He very carefully put a match to it when he finished, then looked around at the men.

"Haid's due to hit Spengler's place tonight," he announced. "Better get saddled up. We'll be riding." He nodded at the Kid. "We'll need your brand of shooting afore this night is over."

INSIDE OF half an hour they were riding out of Coyote Town, down into the foothills toward the Stovepipe range. The shadows lengthened. When they halted to give their ponies a breather, the Kid asked the Spider what the plans were.

"Haid's going to hit the Spengler outfit tonight—along about midnight ....I aim to hogtie him, Strant."

"Have you warned this Spengler?"

The Spider shook his head. "No.... No sense in it. He'd never believe me anyway. And I want to catch Haid—or mebbe even some of his men—redhanded to hang the deadwood on who he's working for, that—" And there was a string of those gross epithets. "Leave everything to me, Kid."

They came out of an arroyo onto the grazing land a little after nightfall. Rode northward, bent off to follow a feeder creek, then hit a wheel-rutted range rod. The Spider seemed to know exactly where he was going. Another couple of miles and he ordered them to dismount. Over the swell could be seen the lights of Spengler's little place. The Kid wondered why Haid would want to be bothered hitting such a small outfit; there didn't seem any point in it.

"We'll watch from here," the Spider said, leading the way into a stand of trees overlooking the Spengler place.

They dismounted and began the wait. A couple of riders came down the trail. One of them turned into Spengler's place and went down to the bunkhouse. The Spider's men relaxed. Solo said once: "Spider, Haid's got a pretty big outfit. And there are six of us here."

The Spider smiled in the dark. "This, my friend, is the ace up the sleeve. Haid does not expect us to be here! He—"

There was the sound of a shot from over the swell on the other side of the ranch-house. That was all. Up there in the trees, tensed, they waited. Then a rider came over that swell. He sagged in the saddle, weaved in it as he rode at a walking pace. He turned into the ranchyard of Spengler's place, called out weakly.

"He looks hit bad," the Spider said. Then, after a moment: "They's something strange about this. I smell skunk sweat."

The Kid did too. He was already moving out from the screen of trees when the Spider said they better go

down and take a looksee. The door of the house had opened, and the rider had clambered down from the saddle and staggered in.

They moved down the slope cautiously. Through a front window they could see the rider slumped in a chair, the gray-haired Spengler standing over him with a drink. And then the band of riders moved over that swell on the other side. Pinto Haid was coming in. At the same moment, as a whistle sounded on the night, the Kid saw the supposedly wounded gent in the front room of the ranch-house slick out a gun.

SOLO WAS out of the saddle and running up the steps of the porch before anybody else moved. He slammed open the door and busted in. Just as the jasper with the red stain on his shirt threw his gun on Spengler, the rancher. He whipped it around as the Kid burst into the room, fired wildly. The Kid had one of his cutters out; he loosed it, his second slug pinning the faked wounded man against the back of the chair in which he sat. Spengler let out a yell, then the shooting outside started.

Pinto Haid's men had arrived, expecting to find a setup, a helpless rancher tricked by their supposedly wounded man. Instead they had run into the Spider's little bunch. Lead slammed into the front of the place. Spengler jumped to blow out the lamp and the Kid flung back out the door.

It was bad. The Spider hadn't meant to play it that way, hadn't meant to be caught in front of the place. He'd meant to hit Haid's bunch after they struck. Instead he was caught in front of the house as Pinto Haid rode in. One of his men was pitching from the saddle as the Kid rushed out. Solo's guns joined the fight.

He got off the side of the porch with the wicked livid eyes of the gun muzzles blinking toward him from Haid's bunch fanned out in the ranchyard. A man came dodging up from the trees on the right side of the place. The Kid dropped him with a shot, sent another scuttling back. Down at the bunkhouse, Spengler's hands were trying to get out. But some of Haid's men were down near there, throwing lead at the doorway.

The Kid worked down toward it in the high ragged grass. He threw down from the rear on the men peppering the place. They broke, hitting for the road. The bunkhouse men came out fighting. The Kid turned and moved back toward the house, both guns spouting. He spotted the Spider out of the saddle, standing against the steps of the porch as he fired. He fell back for a moment, nicked in the shoulder. Three men rushed toward him.

The Kid cut in. His left gun clicked empty. There was no time to reload. He sent one of them hobbling away with a wounded leg. The other two turned on him. The first one was the lean yellow-haired Pinto Haid himself, and just behind him was big burly red-headed Nogales Mike Burgee himself, the man the Kid had been hunting. Burgee let out a yelp, triggered once and missed.

Slaunchwise, in a gunman's crouch, The Kid rode the hammer of that righthand gun. But Haid was snake-fast himself; his shot took the Kid in the calf of the right leg at the same instant Solo drilled him through the ribs. Haid was sent spinning half around, back against Burgee, even as the Kid himself rocked and wobbled sideward. Then Burgee was throwing down on him from behind Haid.

The Kid pumped lead once, missed. Burgee's bullet sang past his ear. Solo stumbled, went down to his knees. He knew then it was his life or the swearing Burgee's. Levelled his gun. The killer, Burgee, used his brother-in-law, Haid, as a shield, crouching behind the buckled-over wounded man. Solo's sight was on the gun Burgee levelled. The two weapons exploded together, but the Kid didn't miss that time.

Burgee let out a howl. His Colts flew up from his hand. Then he was reeling backward, shrieking in pain as he held up his shooting hand. Solo's slug had streaked across the back of it and up his forearm. Nogales Mike Burgee bore the Kid's deadly bullet brand across the back of his hand.

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SOLO TRIED to wing him through the shoulder. He didn't want to kill the man; he wanted him alive so he could make the man confess to the murder of Marshal Link Turner. But the hammer of the Kid's gun came down with a click on the firing pin. The weapon had gone empty.

The Spider was back in action, getting his other gun up. Then Haid and Burgee ran for it, legging it for the road out front. A couple of Haid's gunmen covered their retreat as the Kid, attempting to rise and pursue, sagged on one leg. Haid's bunch were hitting the saddle. They busted the breeze back over the swell down which they'd come. The firing ceased.

The Spider called, "Thanks a heap, Kid! They danged nigh had me then."

Gray-headed Spengler came out of the house with his double-barrelled shotgun. Three of his cowhands came piling up from the bunkhouse. There were two dead men in the ranchyard. One of them was the pot-bellied Patsy of the Spider's bunch, drilled through the side of the head. And out beyond them, in the road, was a dead sorrel mare. The Kid and *El Aracnido* were out there when Spengler bent over the animal to examine the brand.

"Just as I thought!" he roared, pointing at the Box-M mark burned on the animal's flank. "Tuck Malson's work! Just like I figgered! He aims to run everybody outa the country. That's a hoss from his spread. He's a-hiring that Haid to do his dirty work. I knew it!"

The Spider gave the Kid a sign. "Let's git moving. They might be back. And we're plumb bad outnumbered for a stand-up ruckus."

They got mounted with Spengler still ranting around, Grady helping the wounded Kid into the kak. "We'll tie up the leg after we git clear," he said. Everything was confusion. One of the bunkhouse hands had a rifle and was yelling about pursuit.

"We stopped 'em, anyway," the Spider said as he led his little band out the ranchyard gate. They turned down the trail the way they had come.

But they didn't get far. About a half mile down, just as they were passing a stand of trees, it happened. Pinto Haid's men came slamming out of them from ambush. They had looped around and waited to catch the Spider. The latter and his bunch never had a chance; lead tore at them out of the darkness.

Grady and the Kid, sloping along in the rear, were quickly cut off from the rest. There was nothing to do but cut for it. The two wheeled their ponies in the hail of slugs and busted the breeze back along the road. Grady yelled and pointed to the right. There was a little dry wash that cut across the range there. They swung into it with Haid's men behind them.

The Kid twisted in the kak, reining up hard a moment. His reloaded right gun spattered lead back at them, forcing them to cut of the trail for protection, to pull up. The two of them rounded a sharp bend in the wash and flung the spur steel to their cayuses.

But it was going to be a long chase. Haid and his men were infuriated, out to smash this *El Araçnido* and his outfit that was countering their play. Wild shots dug the earth behind the pair of fugitives. The wash led into a little gully, half screened by brush. The wounded Kid shouted that time. He and Grady pulled up again and wheeled behind the brush. The Kid's first shot knocked a man from the saddle as the pursuers came to the end of the wash.

HAID'S MEN cut back and began to trigger from cover.

"Cain't let 'em git around and outflank us," Grady snapped once between gunshots.

"Nope—but we can hold 'em a little longer,' the Kid said, and he hit that trigger again as he spotted the shift of a deeper shadow behind a piece of brush.

Then they both held their fire for some minutes. They teamed up well together.

Two Haid men came creeping around an elbow of the wash. Solo and Grady cut loose; the attackers went scuttling back like a couple of

coyotes, one of them howling curses.

"All right,' the Kid said calmly despite the pain of his injured leg. "They will wait quite a spell now." They turned their ponies behind the brush screen and moved into the gully deeper.

Grady seemed to know that piece of country well. He found a side path that led up out of the gully into timbered land. Then they were crossing a piece of rim rock and there was a shout from the rear. Some of Haid's men had already cut around up outside the gully. It was ride for their hides again with their ponies stretching belly, wet with sweat.

They hit open range, followed a fenceline, cut across a bosque. Haid's men were gaining when they dropped down that slope to the chaparral jungle, its black stalks plain in the moonlight. Grady cut into a winding cow path that angled and looped through the chaparral. It was so high it was like riding through a tunnel; they were completely hidden from their pursuers. But when they drew up briefly for a breather once they could catch the thud of hoofs in the rear. Haid's men were determined to give them a catching, and the Kid knew what would happen if they did.

GRADY TURNED off on a cross path to the east. The night was beginning to grow thin, the stars fading. Then they finally emerged from the chaparral on the east side of the Stovepipe valley. They pushed into a canyon. Grady said: "They's a settlement up this way and I got a friend there. Gent by the name of Ab Blossom. He'll take care of us."

The gray wash of a jaundiced dawn had replaced the black of night when they rode into the settlement in a hollow. It was barely more than a cluster of houses around a crossroads. They dismounted before a neat little place with a whitewashed fence in front. But there was no answer when Grady rapped on the door. "Hey. Ab, Ab," he called out guardedly. They didn't want anybody to know they'd come into town, of course.

Then the Kid, as he fired up a quirly, spotted the piece of paper pinned to the door. It read, *"Gone to Headstone. Back by Friday, I hope.... A. Blossom."*

"That's all right," Grady said. "Ab won't mind us using his place; he never locks up." And when he tried the door, it opened easily.

They entered. Grady lighted a lamp and turned it low in the little front room with the neat curtains at the shuttered windows. Then he went out and took their boogered-down ponies around to the shed in the rear. From down the line came the creak of a windlass as some early-rising householder got water from his well.

Grady went out to Blossom's well, came back with a filled bucket. He started a fire in the kitchen stove and proceeded to boil the water. Then they went to work on the blood-clotted leg wound of the Kid.

It wasn't dangerous, more painful than anything else; but the Kid would hobble for some little time though the slug had passed cleanly through the flesh. Grady washed it out expertly, prodded out a chip of splintered lead with his heated Bowie knife, then bound it up. They found some jerked beef and Dutch oven bread and munched on that while they sat in the front room with one shutter partially opened so they could watch the road. Haid's lobos might still track them down, and they'd been danged determined.

They decided to keep watch. The Kid caught some shut-eye first, stretching out on the sofa in the living room. After a couple of hours, with the sun streaming down outside, he rose and relieved tiny Grady. They smoked a couple of cigarets together before the latter bedded down.

"What was the game at Spengler's last night, Grady?" the Kid asked. "Why would Haid want to jump the place? Rustling?"

Grady rubbed his sharp little chin. "Reckon there ain't no harm in letting you know, Kid. Not now. You proved yourself last night. It's that Ben Travis. He's behind all this."

"But the Spider tried to jump Travis' place the night I first saw you and ..." His eyes dropped to that bullet brand on Grady's hand.

Grady nodded. " 'S right. We heard that one of Pinto Haid's men was stay-

ing the night at Travis' place. We wanted to capture him as evidence against Travis—that he was really in cahoots with Haid and hiring him."

Solo frowned through cigaret smoke, puzzled. "But it was a dead Box-M horse—one of Malson's animals—they found in front of Spengler's after Haid pulled out last night."

Grady nodded. "'S right. And that was deliberate. I saw one of Haid's men put the gun to that hoss. He was left as fake evidence that Malson is behind Haid, that Malson wants to grab off the whole range like Ben Travis claims. Actually, Malson don't give a hoot in Hades so long as he can keep his skin full of redeye."

Solo nodded. That seemed logical enough to him after what little he'd seen of young Tuck Malson. He was hardly the picture of a greedy range baron.

"You see, Travis is out for revenge since his father's body was found in the old Malson well. You hear about that?"

The Kid said he had. Grady went on as he drew off his boots to rest.

"Travis is working to get vengeance for that. They's nothing they can do to young Tuck legally. Mebbeso his pop killed old Travis; nobody knows. But now, Ben Travis is trying to turn the whole Stovepipe country against Tuck. That's why Travis is a-hiring Pinto Haid and trying to make it look like Haid is in Tuck Malson's employ. Sabe?"

The Kid said "Yeah" and blew out smoke. "But how does the Spider fit into this picture?"

Grady looked vague and stretched himself on the sofa. "Mebbeso I talked too much already. Wake me in three-four hours and we'll be making tracks back to Coyote Town, Kid." He closed his eyes.

The Kid sat opposite the half-opened shutter, watching the road as he smoked, still trying to add up things. About an hour passed.

A couple of riders went by, old gray-haired men wagging their jaws as they walked their ponies. A woman went down the side street of the settlement toting a market basket. A hoeman passed in his wagon pulled by a sway-backed crowbait. The Kid sat thinking how close he'd come to getting Burgee last night. If that danged second gun hadn't gone empty! Little Grady snored on the sofa, his gunbelt strung over the back of a chair beside him.

Then the Kid galvanized. A horseman was coming up the road into the settlement, a slim rider in male apparel but with yellow hair showing from under her sombrero. Doris Holt who'd been kidnapped, apparently, after the gunning of Turner back in Broken Buttes. The Kid got to the door just as she was p a s s i n g and called to her.

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SHE STARED a moment, then was out of the saddle and running to him. She threw her slim body into his arms. "Solo Strant! The Kid," she said excitedly. "I never thought I'd see you again! This is incredible."

"You escaped from Nogales Mike Burgee," the Kid said.

She nodded. "Yes, he let me go—after we got down here to the Stovepipe country. He—" Then she looked as if she could have bitten off her tongue. "He let me go," she ended lamely, looking to one side.

"Then he was the one who shot Turner," Solo said.

"Y-yes—I guess so," she admitted.

"What were you doing with that gunman in Headstone the other night—when he tried to kill the gambler?" the Kid demanded, something about her making him suspicious.

She stepped back to light up one of her Red Star cigarettes. "Maser—he tried to kill somebody, Solo?" She looked baffled. "I saw him start into that little place. Then there was shooting. I saw him go down, and I got scared; I—I just rode away." She gave the rest of it. This Maser, she said, was a friend from the old days. He'd told her he could find Burgee for her, so she'd started out of town with him when, by the Sage Bar, he said he had to stop off and see a man a moment. That was all she knew.

"He tried to kill—to drygulch a man named the Professor," the Kid said, studying her.

She looked wide-eyed. "The Professor? I don't know who he is."

The Kid remembered his own predicament. "Come inside," he said. "I've got some gents a-looking for me."

She shook her head. "I'll be back, but I've got to go on now. I've got to meet a man the other side of this town; he claims he knows where to find Burgee, Solo."

"Burgee's with Pinto Haid's outfit. I saw him, Doris."

She drew hard on her smoke. "Y-yes, I know—I heard that. But there's some girl over this way he comes to see." Her face went hard. "I—I'd like to catch him when he's away from the bunch." She touched his arm quickly and moved off the little porch. "Do you live here now?"

"No—I'm over in Coyote Town with the Spider's bunch; but you shouldn't try to see Burgee alone. Haid's outfit is plumb poison. They—"

"I'll be back later. I've got to go now." And she was running back to her pony, swinging up into the saddle. At a hand lope she went on through the settlement.

The Kid went back inside, trying to figure out her story. It didn't sound too convincing, but he saw no reason why she should lie to him; and she had always seemed obsessed with her idea of tracking down Burgee.

MAYBE half an hour passed. It seemed the typical dull morning for a settlement like that. Grady tossed on the sofa, then blinked twice as he saw the four riders coming along the road. One of them he recognized at once, a tall cadaverous gent, as one of the Haid outfit he'd encountered last night. And then he spotted the lean Pinto Haid himself, left arm hanging in a sling as the result of that wound the Kid had given him. Solo figured they'd pass on; it didn't seem possible they knew where he and Grady were holed up.

They got opposite the house in the somnolent settlement, then suddenly wheeled their ponies and came crashing toward it. They knew, all right. Two men lit running, guns out. Luckily, Grady had just wakened. The Kid yelled to him. Haid's men saw the latter inside the half opened shutter. They cut loose with a barrage of lead as the Kid ducked to one side.

But the next instant they got a terrific surprise. They'd evidently expected to find the wounded Kid alone, but four guns, the Kid's and Grady's chimed in a lethal staccato chant through that opened shutter. Flung down a hail of slugs. One man rocked in the saddle, wounded. One of those on foot was whipped around when he was nicked in the shoulder. They triggered wildly for another few moments. Then Haid shouted something. The two on foot flung for their saddles, were high-tailing it down the road out of the settlement.

"They'll be back," the Kid spat. "They probably got the rest of the bunch scouring the country around about and when—"

He caught the groan from Grady and switched about. The wisp of a man fallen back into a chair, guns on the floor, his tiny face a wan mask of approaching death in the frame of that long hair. Solo ran to him. Grady had caught a slug in on one side of his chest. Even then a reddish bubble frothed up on his lips. He was about to take the long long trail. Nothing could be done for him.

"Kid," he gasped out in a whisper, "Git going. Leave me. I'm finished ...But—but don't let 'em get you. Don't..."

The Kid dashed into the kitchen for a bottle of whiskey he remembered seeing there. When he returned with it, Grady shook his head. He was trying to talk again.

"Ride—K-Kid," he mouthed. "An' —an' change that rig some, Kid— You're a marked jasper now....And —and—" He pawed feebly at the red blotch on his chest. "And trust the Professor... He—he's all right. He's straight... He—he's playing a big

game... Trust the Per—"

The voice died. Grady's little body jerked convulsively in the chair once, then he was gone. Solo knew when he failed to find a pulse beat. He looked regretfully at the man's hand he held, at his bullet brand on the back of it. It never failed. Those who bore it died—very soon...

THE KID left in a matter of minutes. Curious inhabitants of the settlement were beginning to venture out, and there was no sense in staying. There was always the risk that Haid might return with reinforcements. He went out to the shed and saddled up one of the ponies and sloped off through the trees. After a mile, he looped around to the south, determined to go back to Headstone.

He didn't know how to find his way back to Coyote Town where the Spider and the rest of them probably were. And he wanted to see that Professor again, wanted to ask him some questions. He found a stage road with a sign reading "Headstone" and pointing southward and followed it. His leg throbbed painfully but he kept riding. Something told him a showdown was nearing in this Stovepipe set-up, that Haid was going haywire and was determined to burn down those opposing him.

In the afternon he came across a little store at a crossing, bought himself a checkered shirt and a gray sombrero. Down the trail he donned them, also taking a rusty black coat from his saddle roll and putting that on over the new shirt. That hid the gleaming butts of those silver-stocked weapons, too. Then he rode on, trying to figure things, to put things together. Instinct told him *El Aracnido* was the key to the layout, that he would know the answers. Solo wondered who was hiring the outlaw to oppose Pinto Haid. The answer to that seemed to be Professor Ambler, the gambler.

He pushed southward through the rest of the hot day and without cutting any sign of Haid and his bunch. Evening came with a slice of moon climbing over the southwestern hills. He passed a couple of cowhands once, a hoeman driving a wagonload of supplies out from town. He had to stop several times to rest his cayuse and his own sore leg. It was late when he finally crossed the bridge into Headstone. The stores were closed up and no throngs crowded the streets now; but the whiskey mills and the honky tonks were still going full swing.

He was moving up the main line when three figures emerged from the doorway of one of the places. The Kid had pulled off his gray sombrero momentarily to sleeve his forehead. Between the sultry night and the pain of the leg, he was sweating. And then one of them let out a yell.

"That's him! There he is—the dirty marshal-killer! That's the Kid hisself!"

Solo's eyes jerked around; it was the frog-faced Pheb who'd been with that peace officer's posse at the old house outside Broken Butte—The vacant-eyed gent who'd tried to drill the Kid as he made his escape that night. And the one on whom the Kid had inflicted his deadly gun sign in their brief shooting duel. The Kid saw simultaneously that the pair with him wore U.S. marshal's badges; he threw spur steel to his pony.

IT WAS too late. Shots spanged out on the street. The cayuse stumbled, then wavered toward the gutter at the other side, sinking fast; the animal had been hit. Solo dropped from the saddle, wavered himself, then lunged into the shadows on the far sidewalk and hobbled along.

More shots poured after him. The Kid turned once to fire over the heads of the pursuing trio. He didn't want to burn down a lawman if he could help it; but that crazed Pheb was gaining on him fast. Then a man stepped from one of the little saloons that dotted the street. It was Mike the Professor's tall gunman.

"Kid!" he cried. Hesitated only a moment then was down beside him helping him along by one arm. "Here

—down here!" They were at an alley. Mike steered Solo into its dark maw. A slug ripped wood from the corner of a store.

Mike, who seemed to know exactly what his role was under the circumstances, wheeled with drawn gun. His shot took the screaming, racing Pheb in the side of the head. The blood-hungry posseman from Broken Butte, he with his twisted mind, went down in the gutter like a poleaxed doggie, his brains leaking out. Again the terrible gun sign, the bullet brand of the Kid, had claimed its victim. The two pursuing marshals halted, one to bend over the mortally hit Pheb. Solo and Mike moved on down the pitlike alley.

"Here," Mike said. He guided the Kid into a grass-grown lot next to a little hovel. They came out behind it, went through a scrawny stand of trees and over a little knoll. "Wait here, Kid...I'll see what they're doing." Mike moved off.

The Kid was nauseated; he'd struck that wounded leg hard in quitting the horse. He had to fight off dizziness. Ten minutes or so passed. The Kid had moved down the little gully when he heard somebody prowling around once. But Mike did not return. Solo couldn't stand the waiting any longer; holstering one weapon, he walked painfully down the gully and came out on a side road. He could hear considerable noise from the main line over the man-hunt that had started. There was a single shot.

He moved along the street, not quite certain of his next move. It was a bad break at this instant to have the Law jump him.

"Sure am a plumb popular man in this piece of country," he told himself with grim humor. "Tracked from Broken Butte for an alleged killing ...Marshals on my coat-tails. Travis will be after me by now for killing his hand. Haid's after me. And mebbeso the Spider'll figure I up and deserted him after giving my word."

His fingers went into a pocket of his pants where he'd put the silver skull, after swapping hats, that usually swung at his chin. He rubbed it. It seemed a peculiar gesture after the trouble he'd just stepped into. He was standing against a tree in the dimness to rest his leg a moment. There was still yelling down on the main road. Then he noticed the man who'd come into the side street staring suspiciously at him from across the way by a pole-cabin meat store.

THE KID thought fast and reeled away as if orey-eyed. He was just back from a big white building and he turned down behind it where it was darker. He passed a long horse shed, then saw he was behind the town's big hotel. There was an open doorway. He could see up a hallway to the lights of the lobby. And the man who'd been watching him had been joined by another; both of them were staring at where the Kid had gone.

He couldn't risk more trouble and bring the whole town down on him now; he had to bluff it. He walked in the door and forward to the wide-flung lobby. It was practically deserted, with everybody out on the big gallery to see what the gun-play was about. An old bearded man dozed in a chair. There was nobody behind the desk.

The Kid decided it would be as good a place to hole up as any. He turned around a big pot-bellied stove, cold now, and moved up the wide staircase as casually as any customer. He reached the second floor unchallenged, then started to draw back as he saw a figure going down the hall to the right. She turned to enter a room. It was Doris. Doris Holt. The door closed after her.

Solo Strant hesitated only a moment; then, one gun ready at his side, he went down to the door and knocked. He had to find out, some hunch told him, what she was doing in Headstone now. She opened up, gripping her holstered .38 by its butt. Her eyes started from her head when she saw him.

"They didn't get you today—then?" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" he asked,

voice husky from strain, as he stepped in quickly.

"Back—back at the settlement," she said, flushing as if she'd said too much. "I—I came riding back through. They said there'd been a gun-fight. I was afraid..." She broke off, moist lips slightly parted.

The Kid shook his head, palming the sweat from his face. "No, I got away." It sounded a little ridiculous to him.

THE NEXT moment he was staring. Something had leaped into her usually hard eyes. A soft glowing light. Then she had stepped against him and was kissing him full on the mouth, kissing him hotly as she clung to his arms. He pushed her away gently.

"Doris," he said, amazed. And then he knew that, in her peculiar way, at that instant she had suddenly discovered she loved him. In some fashion, at least.

She picked up a lighted cigaret from the table, and he had never heard her voice so soft, so pleading. "Kid, ride...Ride far away. Things are going to be bad. I—I know Burgee will be in town tonight—and with some men, some friends. He won't dare hurt me. But you—"

"I've got to get him for that killing they claim I did, Doris," Solo got out.

She shook her head vehemently, clasping one of his hands. "Get away, Solo—while you can. You, you've got enemies in this piece of country. Bad ones. A man called Travis has made a charge of murder against you with the local peace officer. Marshals are in town, Solo."

"I know," he said casually.

"Get away, Solo," she begged. "Forget Mike Burgee. Forget it all. He's too strong for you."

Solo's eyes got that sleepy look "No... And I've got to clear myself."

She flung herself against him once more, breathing quickly. More than once women, even enemies, had become enamored of the half-pint Kid.

"Solo—leave. For my sake, please! Forget Mike. Just ride. I'll go to the Law—well, later—and swear you did not kill Link Turner. I know you didn't! But—leave!" Her body quivered like a frightened animal's.

The Kid pushed her gently away again. "You've got your job to do; I've got mine. I'm not running. Ain't never eaten crow for no man yet."

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You could turn yourself over to the U.S. officers. Then you'd be safe, Solo... And at the trial—"

"Your testimony mightn't be enough," he cut her off. "Safe? A man can't ride the out-trails and ever be safe. I'm running this thing down till I hang the deadwood on Burgee."

"Oh..." Her eyes narrowed still more. "Oh," she said again. "That gunning before—it was at you?"

He nodded.

"And you won't pull out of the Stovepipe country?"

The Kid shook his head.

She seemed undecided for a long moment, drawing on the cigaret. Then, "You'd better go now, I guess. I've got a friend coming to see me ... there's a back stairway you can get out by."

She showed him where it was, at one end of the hall. She helped him halfway down it, gripped his hand once, looking into his eyes. Then her face went back into its hard ruthless mold and she turned back up the stairs.

The Kid emerged into the night from a back corner of the sprawling building. He was still amazed by the way she'd reacted. And he was wondering what she knew that made her want him to quit the country so badly...

13

THERE WAS a saddled pony in the big shed along with a number of unsaddled animals. The Kid had no scruples about leading it out and climbing into the kak. He was a desperate man now, wanted, hunted; and he had to strike fast.

He got out in the side road, then spurred the knobby-legged roan down it away from the main line. Somebody

called out once but he paid no heed. He got to the rim of the town, quartered till he found that branch creek, then worked along it till he was at the end of the road where the *Sage Bar,* where he'd first met the Professor, stood. He rode up into that furtive almost deserted section of Headstone and dismounted. Several sweated-up cayuses stood at the hitchrail; somebody had just come in from a long hard ride.

Solo walked into the mangy place. Aside from the fat drink wrangler, nobody was at the bar. "Just closing down," the latter announced hastily. "Nobody's here now. Ain't seen the Perfessor tonight."

The Kid threw money on the counter. The man had been too glib, without being asked any questions, to be telling the truth. "I'm buying a drink, mister."

"But I'm telling you, fella, that—"

And then the door onto the little corner room, where the Kid had been made practically a captive by the Professor once, swung ajar, creaked open wider. And the Kid saw the Professor. Or maybe it was *El Aracnido;* he couldn't be sure.

It was a locoed picture, by lamplight. The gambler stood there in the little room, half-turned toward the Kid. It was the Professor all right; Mike and another gunman were with him. The gambler was fitting on his spectacles. Around his head, over the sleek hair, was a blood-stained bandage. But the frock coat and the flowered vest were missing. Instead he stood in the dirty boots and jeans and green-decorated bolero of *El Aracnido.* He looked ineffably tired, discouraged.

One of the men saw the open door. The Professor glanced out of it and spotted the Kid. Shrugged. "It makes little difference now," he said. "He might as well know; I'm afraid the game is over."

The Kid limped over to the corner room, still amazed. On the table inside he saw the wig of ragged black hair. The gambler had worn it as part of his disguise when he played the role of the Spider. That and the grimy beard stubble and the squint that came from lack of the glasses had been his disguise. Those things and that affected trick of speaking with obscene oaths.

SOLO HAD instinctively dropped a hand to one of his silver butts, but Mike, with a gun half shucked out, warned him. "Easy, Kid....Take it easy."

The gambler nodded as he dropped into a chair. "Yes, you're among friends, Strant....All right, I was the Spider. But never an outlaw; you should realize that now."

Solo thought he did. He realized, too, now how he'd been tricked by the Professor into going out to the cabin in the brush. And then how he'd come to be captured by the Spider's men. He said slowly: "What's the game, Professor?"

The Professor, the Spider, lighted up one of his usual cigars instead of the brown paper cigarets he had affected out in Coyote Town. "I've been fighting for peace on this range, Strant....I've been fighting to stop a wave of bloodshed and violence—to lick the hand of locoed Ben Travis. He's hiring Haid."

The Kid nodded, remembering what little Grady had told him.

"The Law hereabouts isn't strong enough. If I'd played it straight and in the open as myself, they'd have said I was in cahoots with Tuck Malson....This way, posing as an outlaw myself, seemed better; it made it harder for Haid to figure who to strike at, too."

The Kid nodded as the gambler poured drinks for them both, waved to a chair. "Mebbeso I'm believing you, Ambler. But why are you doing it? Why do you want to preserve law and order in the Stovepipe country?" He built a tube of Durham. "Why've you been risking your hide?"

The gambler put down his drink and fingered the head bandages before he answered. "It'll sound sorta strange, I reckon....You see, only the old timers remember it. But years ago, when I was a younker, my father was hung in this town as a horsethief. Which he was! As well as being a lowdown drunkard and a barroom tough....He deserved anything they did to him and I knew it." The

Professor stared off into space. "I went away from here, worked my way up. I became a card dealer, an honest one, a straight one. I got so I could whip anybody—playing it straight. Then I came back here. I'm a big man in this pueblo. Folks trust me, too. I've been proud of that—proud of being able to come back where my dad was a failure."

He readjusted his glasses a moment, then went on. "I've come to love the Stovepipe—and Headstone. I want to see things run right here. . So I drew chips in the game against Travis and Pinto Haid in my own way."

There was no doubting the man from the ring of sincerity in his voice.

"But the game is about up now. I fear," he went on, lips compressing. "Somehow Haid learned about our hideout in Coyote Town. He hit there earlier tonight. Doc and I finally cut our way out, but we were the only ones. And I think they know who the Spider is now, I think they do." He fingered the bandage over the scalp gash again. "That danged woman was with them when they came."

"What woman?" the Kid asked.

"Mike Burgee's wife; Pinto Haid's sister. She just drifted in a short spell back. She was going under the name of Doris Holt," the Professor said.

Solo stiffened in his chair. Doris Holt? Burgee's wife who'd been riding with him and Turner, the late marshal, when they'd been trying to nab Burgee. "Are you sure of that, Professor?"

The gambler nodded wearily as he polished his glasses. "Absolutely. My sources of information are always dependable. She came into this strip of country just before you arrived, Kid."

THE KID stood up. Things were becoming clear to him now, terribly clear. And he sensed how he'd been duped. No wonder he just failed to grab off Burgee time after time when his wife was with them, learning what they learned, always able to warn him in time. No wonder Burgee knew where to find them and shoot Turner and make it look as if he, Solo, had done it.

Solo cursed softly. No wonder. And he knew then that the double-crossing girl was the one who'd tipped Haid's men off to the house he and Grady were in up in that settlement. Solo felt the crimson creep up his neck. It was he, who, inadvertently, had told her the Spider's bunch could be found at Coyote Town. She had played him for an absolute fool.

The gambler put down the rest of his drink. "They'll be big trouble now if Haid really knows who I am."

Solo heeled out his quirly. His hunch that the showdown was close hadn't been wrong, he knew now. He thought of Doris, in a spurt of affection for him, begging him to quit, to leave the country. Because she knew that Burgee and "some friends"—which meant Haid's band—were coming in. Coming in to strike at the Professor who was blocking his game.

Solo thought fast. He had to get Burgee; he fingered that ten-dollar lucky goldpiece of Burgee's in his pocket. And that meant Pinto Haid had to be stopped. There'd be blood on the moon tonight all right.

Then he had the answer. The clever daring girl, Burgee's wife, Doris. She could be the key pawn when Pinto Haid struck. Solo put on his gray sombrero.

"Sit tight and play 'em close to your chest, gambler," he told the Professor. "I'll be back in a little spell."

The Professor made a hopeless gesture with his hands, cleaned now. "You're free to go your own way, Kid; it looks like they've beaten my game. Haid has too many men."

"Sit tight," the Kid repeated. "We are playing out this string together." Then he left.

14

REMOUNTED, he looped around the edge of the town and found the road that led down beside the hotel. Back a little from it, he left the horse ground-anchored in the heavy shadows, then walked down to the back of the place. The town was fairly quiet now though

there was the refrain of a brassy piano from one of the dancehalls. He found that corner entrance of the hotel to the back stairs, started up them.

A man stepped out of the shadows and challenged him. The Kid kept the trigger of his drawn gun penned but struck like a tiger cat, springing. An uproar was the last thing he wanted at that moment. The other struck him a glancing blow on the shoulder with the weapon he'd hurriedly hauled but hadn't had time to cock. Then the Kid was on him.

He smashed a blow to the gent's mouth as he tried to yell out. The man did manage to say, "Hell, you're the Silver Kid! You—" He ducked a swing of the Kid's gun barrel, lashed out with a kick.

Then the Kid had battered the other's hogleg from his hand, using his gun as a club. With his other hand, he dug for the jasper's windpipe. They both went to the floor. The Kid came out on top, squeezing the man's windpipe for all he was worth. The other grew weaker. His big hand locked around the Kid's gun hand then his wrist slipped, and Solo brought the .45 barrel down over his forehead to silence him for some little time.

He climbed erect, almost pitched on his face before he could get his wounded leg propped under him. He figured this was one of Haid's band that had been sent up here to protect the girl as the bunch worked into town. A bald man stuck his head out a door down the line. The Kid put on a smile.

"Just some orey-eyed coot," he explained easily, "who was prowling around, aiming to rob a room, I reckon."

The bald-headed hombre, a pale jewelry drummer, jerked his head back in and slammed the door in fright. The Kid moved as swiftly as he was able down to Doris' door. He'd hardly rapped the second time when it swung open wide.

"Mike!" the gun girl cried, expecting her husband. "I thought you'd never come. I—Solo!"

THE KID had his gun leveled. She was only a woman, true. But he had learned by bitter experience how hard and dangerous she could be.

"Not Mike—yet," he said grimly. "But you and me, ma'm, we're a-going to take a little pasear and—" He saw her move a hand toward where the derringer was probably in the pocket of her man's pants. He struck down the hand, knowing this was no time for false chivalry. Grabbed her by a shoulder as she sought to twist away and break back into the room.

"Look, ma'm, men's lives are at stake! If I have to pull the trigger on you, I will. Or on anybody else who interferes. Sabe?"

She looked into his Sphinxlike face, into those sleepy-seeming eyes. Something she saw there made her shudder a moment. Then she summoned her feminine wiles, moving toward him, lifting her arms. She was as tough as a stove-dried boot, as tough as any man he'd encountered in her own way. He guessed now, after what he'd just learned from the Professor, that she'd had a hand in it when Mike Burgee, her husband, had gunned down Turner through the shutter of the abandoned house at Broken Butte.

She said, very softly, huskily, "Kid, forget the Professor! What does he mean to you? Forget Mike. You can get clear of that charge. Afterward, I'll swear you didn't do it.... *After* I leave Mike."

"What the—" the Kid started.

"Yes, I am leaving him. He knows. Now that he's out of danger, I want no part of him. Honestly, Kid. You and I—we can go away together somewhere. I've got dinero cached away." Her eyes sparkled like something inhuman. "Kid, I've never met an hombre like you before! Never-r! I—"

Then the Kid caught himself. One of her arms was very soft around his

neck. He could feel her pliant body close to his. He started to jerk the arm away. Like a tigress, she tried to grasp the gun he held in his right hand. He was thrown back against the door frame on his bad leg, but he ripped his shooting iron free. And then he jabbed it against her so sharply she was forced into a sitting position on the bed.

The Kid said, "Get your hat and coat! We're leaving."

She almost literally spat at him. "You wouldn't dare shoot me! Mike'd—"

He smiled coldly. "I'm handling Mike Burgee in my own way later... As for you, no, I wouldn't drill a woman. But, by grab, I'd mess up your face with a gun whipping so that no man would ever look at you again. Link Turner got killed with your help; Grady died because you double-crossed me out at the settlement and tipped off Haid. They were good men." He made himself sound as brutal as he could. "Now if you want that face scarred up for life—so even Mike Burgee wouldn't look at it without flinching.... Well?"

It worked. She threw quivering hands over her face as if she feared he might start to work with the gun beating right then. After all, she was a woman who'd lived by her looks for years. She nodded weakly, rose, pulled on a sombrero and picked up a gray coat. The Kid saw her .38 on a table and tossed it under the bed. Then he reached into her pocket and snagged out that derringer and sent it after the larger weapon. They stepped out into the hall where the unconscious man still lay.

HE WARNED her, "Yelling wouldn't do no good, ma'm. I got nothing to lose any more. I'm a ranny with a price on his head."

Her eyes shot venom at him. She was infuriated at failing to beguile him.

He went on with that deadly calm, "Do what I say and nothing will happen to you. I promise you that."

"Mike will nail your hide to a fence for this afterward," she flung in a hot whisper.

"I never worry about the future much, ma'm," he said with that cold smile. "Now walk. And no yelling!" He prodded her down that back stairs at the end of the hall. They almost fell over a drunk in the backyard of the hotel. Then they were over by the horseshed.

"Better git yourself a pony, ma'm, unless you prefer to walk a heap."

She led a pony out, a saddleless animal but with a halter. Still keeping her covered, he waited for her to mount out in the side road. Then he swung up, painfully, himself, and took the halter of her horse in his free hand. Her sombrero was back on her shoulders so that her yellow hair gleamed in the moonlight.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked defiantly.

"As a hostage," he told her bluntly. "And—"

A couple of riders turned up at the intersection with the main road. Men from Haid's band who were seeping into Headstone for the big showdown. One of them recognized her and yelled:

"Doris! Wait! Mike isn't here yet and—"

"Hey, that's that damned Kid!" the other blurted. The Kid's coat had fallen back to reveal his second silver-butted Colts. "Look out for the little devil! He's got Doris! He—" He was digging for his hardware.

The Kid triggered once, just as a couple of other mounted lobos swung up the main line. One of the men screamed. And then Doris had kicked her pony in the ribs to tear the halter from the Kids grip and go swinging down the road.

The Kid wheeled and took after her. She was the key card in this game now, the big ace.

Riding bare-backed, she rocked and almost fell from the borrowed pony, forced to rein up. The Kid caught up

to her and grabbed the halter again as two slugs whined by his head. Then he spurred on, taking her along. The firing ceased for a few moments. Haid's gunhands didn't dare risk hitting the outlaw's sister.

But Doris Haid Burgee, who'd masqueraded under the name of "Holt" was a nervy woman. She swung her galloping animal as far from the Kid's as she could. And the gun reports snorted on the night again. One slug nicked the sleeve of the Kid's right arm.

He spotted an alley beside a store, forced both their horses into it. Then he pulled up and wheeled again. His right weapon talked its staccato piece. The pursuing trio broke for the two sides of the road and the protection of the trees, reining down. They had respect now for the Kid's weapons.

He thought once, *I'm practically eating lead tonight.*

He led the girl's animal on down to the back of the alley. "Don't drop off and try to escape," he warned her, putting harshness into his voice. "If I lose this hand I'm as good as a dead man, ma'm. They'd have me as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. Don't make me—" He gestured with his smoking weapon.

SHE SAID nothing, plainly afraid of the Kid now. They turned down behind the places on the side road at a lope. Then there was a tree-shrouded lane running off to the left. The Kid took that course. Haid's men came busting into the backyard behind the store. Again the nervy Kid pulled up a moment and took careful aim. His weapon spat livid flame slash from the heavy shadows beneath the trees. One of them went up stiff-legged in the stirrups, cursing in pain. Solo continued down the lane with the girl.

They angled off between a couple of little dark cabins, dropped down a sandy slope. There was a stretch of heavy brush with a string of cottonwoods. Solo cut into that, towing the girl's pony. Then he pulled up. He aimed to get the girl around to that place where the Professor was. He didn't want to have to flee town and double around after a chase. And he could hear them following.

"Remember—I warned you," he told the girl again.

Two of the Haid bunch came riding down past the brush where they waited, the Kid bent low in the kak. He put his gun muzzle against her ribs though he knew inside himself he never could have shot her.

One of the two riders said, "He'll be busting the breeze outa town, lickety split—now that he's got Haid's sister. He'll try to slip across the creek branch."

"Let's work down there," said the other. They moved off, veering to the right.

The Kid waited a couple of minutes. Then he led Doris down through the brush that creaked with the rising night wind. They swung to the left behind a low sandy ridge and reached the creek branch themselves. Then the Kid turned upstream along it. He heard some yelling behind once. But they got down to the end of the road in the dunes by the *Sage Bar.*

Solo had his gun cocked as he turned back up that side road. Haid's men might be prowling the town already, prepared to crack down on the Professor. Nothing happened though and they drew up before the place. Only a dim light burned inside now and Mike, the tall gunman, glided out onto the porch, gun steel gleaming in his hand.

"It's me—Strant," the Kid called. "I got us a hostage—an ace in the deck, Mike.... Keep her covered though; she's a wildcat. Burgee's wife." Then the battered Kid slid wearily from the saddle.

"Burgee's wife, Kid?" Mike was out there and pinioning the girl by one arm as she too dropped down.

They went inside. The Professor was back at that corner table, still in

his Mex garb of the Spider, when they walked in. He hit his feet, throwing away his cigar and forgetting the cards fanned out on the table before him. He recognized the sullen-faced girl at once.

"Holy smoke, Kid, how'd you get her? You've brought me the hole card in this deck! Now we have a chance to break Haid."

AFTER A hurried parley, they put the girl in that little corner room the gambler used as an office, barred the door on the outside. There was no chance of her escaping by the one window. It was heavily boarded up.

The gambler strapped on a black brass-studded gun belt. "Now let Pinto Haid and Burgee come," he said with new confidence.

But the Kid shook his head. "I figure it'd be better to find them before they come smashing at us. Then, in all the shooting and confusion, it might be too late to let 'em know we got a prisoner."

The Professor thought it over, then nodded. "You're boss on this deal, Kid."

A few moments later, the Kid and the gambler with Mike and two other gun guards of the Professor's were moving warily down the side road toward the main street of the town that was beginning to bed down. The gambler spat into the dust once under the bright moon.

"Strange how the tide can turn on a man," he mentioned. "Word's gotten around that Haid is a-going to smash me, that he's coming in. And a heap of the men I've taken care of and paid off for years have run out on me. Just plumb disappeared; they think I'm whipped."

The Kid nodded. It was human nature, he knew. "All right. We know the deal. I want Burgee to clear myself; you're out to break Pinto Haid. That's the way we play it?"

"That's the way," said the gambler. "It'll be better if we can find Haid and have a parley on it first. Might save a heap of blood-letting. I can make a deal with Haid. Release his sister after he gets clear of this piece of country and then Travis will—"

But it wasn't to be that way. The Kid caught a faint moment behind a tree. Then his gun was up and licking muzzle flame even as two shots snarled at them from behind two trees. Some of Haid's men had been already creeping up on the place they'd discovered was the gambler's headquarters, the hangout of the man who was also the Spider.

The gun reports were like a tocsin. Riders burst out of a livery barn alley a little way down from the main road. There was to be no parley. The Kid glimpsed the dark lead-headed Haid at the head of the horsemen. Haid was out for blood, set to wipe out an enemy who was blocking his game of inciting violence on the Stovepipe range. The Kid, down on one knee, sent one of the men afoot staggering away from a tree. Then he and the Professor's little band began to back slowly.

The Colts whiplashed on the night. A couple of horsemen tried to dash down the side of the broad ragged side road to outflank them. They were stopped. But tall Mike rocked on his skinny legs with an arm wound. He was able to use only one weapon after that. The Kid caught a glimpse of the Professor, stovepipe hat gone, bandaged head bared, as he ducked over behind a stump to shove a few fresh shells into one of his weapons. Then he nicked one of the charging riders. He was a cool one, plenty nervy, the Kid realized.

THEY WERE almost trapped, almost surrounded. Scuttling backward on his bad leg as he cannily held his fire, the Kid happened to glance over his shoulder. He saw a couple of lobos just edging around the front corner of a cabin some yards behind them. He hopped toward them,

triggering. Wood jumped from the raw end poles of the cabin. One of the outlaws dropped to hands and knees for a moment. Then they retreated frantically back down beside the house.

One of the gambler's other gun guards was hit now, badly hurt. Half buckled over he went staggering back toward the *Sage Bar*. The Kid cursed the clear light of the waxing moon. In a running fight like this, outnumbered as they were, it would be almost better to play it in heavy darkness. Involuntarily he jerked sideways as a slug nicked the rim of his new gray skypiece, then threw down on the crouched man by some steps who'd come so close to getting him.

They were almost back to the bar. They got a slight bit of aid then; that gun guard who'd been left back there was out on the porch with a double barrelled shotgun. He let go with a blast, and the horsemen in the van of the screaming Haid's bunch pulled up sharply. The little party scrambled up the steps and into the ramshackle barroom, the Kid being the last to enter. The door was slammed and barred.

Solo shifted over to behind one of the front windows, knowing full well this might be his last fight. But his powder-grimed face was calm. Once, reloading, he plunged a hand into his pants pocket to finger that silver skull briefly as a lucky omen. Haid's bunch were standing off up the road a few moments, parleying. Then Haid shouted something.

They came on again, piling lead into the barroom, fanning out. "I aim to burn down every last coyote of 'em!" Haid's roar came through a split-second lull in the fire.

And the Kid picked out burly red-headed Nogales Mike Burgee for the first time. He was scrambling over the railing of a house porch across the road and up a little way. He toted a rifle. It was going to be a wicked game to a savage finish.

Lead raked through the shattered windows of the little joint, crisscrossing lethally inside the darkened room. Mike cursed once. He'd been hit again. The Professor called out: "Better save your lead till you got a clear shot! We ain't got too many shells here."

The Kid had already been doing that. He thought he had one on Haid in the saddle over by a fence, but the Kid missed for once. And the sporadic but relentless fire from three sides on the outside kept pounding into the place. The gunner who'd used the shotgun yelled from the rear that men were working through the brush out there as the night waned and daylight began to come.

Then there was a brief break in the firing and the Kid played the hole card. Risking stepping close to the lead-riddled front window by the end of the bar, he called out to where he knew Burgee was sniping with the rifle.

"Mike Burgee! Burgee, we got your wife in here! How do you want her—

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IT WORKED, for the moment, anyway.

All shooting stopped. Burgee jumped up, staring, from behind the porch railing down the line. He was pale and gaping-mouthed suddenly in the mounting light. He yelled something to Haid, then called to the Kid:

"Ya lying coyote! You ain't got Doris. She's back at the hotel—"

"You didn't meet her there like you was supposed to, did you?" challenged the Kid, cutting in. "She was not there when you came, was she? No! Because she's here, Burgee. Wait—"

He walked over to the bar and picked up the girl's sombrero that he had taken from her when he brought her in. He held it out through a gap in the window. "That's her sombrero, ain't it, Burgee?"

Burgee even walked down from that porch to get a closer look at it, risking his own life. The killer was almighty fond of the yellow-haired woman. He nodded instinctively. Then he turned and ran back to Pinto Haid to where he sat his horse. They could be seen arguing fiercely. Haid kept shaking his head.

Solo called, "We're out to save our own hides, Burgee.... If you aim to see your wife safe again...." He let it hang there.

Burgee bawled, "Wait!" There was no more shooting now. Then Haid lifted his gun as if to take a blow at his brother-in-law from the saddle. He could be heard cursing. He turned his face toward the barroom.

"You lay a finger on my sister and I'll peel the hide off every last one of you alive!" he blasted. "I'll burn your damn eyes out and tie you naked to anthills! I'll flog you till your dead—every damn last coyote of you—if anything happens to her!" He was a brutal man, half crazed now with his craving for vengeance. His voice was thick with whiskey too.

"Burn 'em outa there!" he yelled at his men.

And the battle was on again. Lead ripped into the dry rotting wood of the barroom. The Kid felt a sting on his cheek. When he touched it his fingers came down red and he knew he'd been nicked. But he put lead into the leg of a man creeping up beside a house across the way. Then one of the gun guards inside said: "I need fresh cartridges! My shell belt is empty."

There was no answer because there were no more, save what each man toted on him or in his weapons. And as the first roseate rays of the sun speared down the road, there was a rush on the place.

THEY DROVE it off. Two of Haid's men moved back up the road wounded, and Pinto Haid boomed down at the place: "Professor, come out and give yourself up—or we'll set fire to the place! We'll burn you out like rats! I'm warning."

The Kid started to say, "With his sister here he wouldn't—"

But the gambler said quietly, "When Pinto Haid's in a drunken rage like now, he'll do anything. And nobody in Headstone'll dare try to stop him; they're afraid of him. He'll burn us."

The firing had broken off again. "There's only one way," the Professor announced calmly. He drew out a white silk handkerchief, unbarred the front door, waved the handkerchief out it. Then he stepped out himself, his guns holstered.

"Haid, there's one way to settle this thing. We'll call a truce and gamble for it," the Professor called.

Haid rode his piebald horse a little way down the road. "Gamble? How?"

"Cut the cards, Haid.... You win—and I surrender to you.... I win—and I hold your sister till you get clear of this country permanently."

Haid sat staring down at the slim gambler on the porch. He said something to Burgee and another man standing close to him. The Kid recalled then hearing that Pinto Haid, in the past, had been a slick cardman himself.

Haid yelled, "I got your word on a truce—no tricks?"

"You got my word," answered the Professor.

After a moment, Haid dropped from the saddle. He came striding along with red-haired Burgee beside him, picking up three more gunmen on the way. They came up to the porch.

The Kid wanted to protest fiercely. It meant he would sacrifice his chance of getting Burgee now for that killing. But Solo realized there were other lives than his own at stake; and once the lobos fired the place, the game would be up.

"Tell your men to pen their guns, Professor," Haid demanded. And the gambler turned and called it back

into the barroom. "If they's any tricks, Professor—"

"You know my reputation for keeping my word and dealing 'em straight, Haid," the gambler cut in sharply.

Haid and his brother-in-law and the three with them slowly penned their own weapons. Still Haid would not come in.

"Me and Mike'll come inside with you and one other man alone," he declared. "Git the rest of your coyotes out here on the porch where my boys can watch 'em."

It was done, the Kid remaining inside with the gambler by tacit understanding. Haid came in, bullet eyes glaring, face flushed. Mike Burgee followed, sneering at the Kid whom he recognized.

"Nice morning for a killing," he threw at Solo.

The Kid, actually quivering with anger and impotence said nothing. The Professor, as nonchalantly as if he were going to sit in a two-bit game, pulled a deck of cards from a pocket and stepped over to the bar.

"We'll cut."

HAID SPAT on the floor and drew out a deck of his own from a pocket of his long black coat. "We'll cut with mine—best two outa three," he said triumphantly.

Solo gasped but the Professor only shrugged. He took Haid's deck, shuffled it with professional ease, put it on the bar top. Haid picked them up and riffled them through once, then laid them down.

"You first," the Professor said lightly, "if you wish."

That seemed to suit Haid. Grinning nastily, he cut and turned up a heart jack. Laughed a little. The gambler's fingers touched the side of the deck like sensitive antennae. Then he lighted off a portion, and showed the queen of spades. Haid swore and swallowed loudly, glanced at Burgee.

Then he cut again, and produced the king of spades. The gambler made a deprecatory gesture. A glassy light came into his eyes as he fingered the sides of the deck as if he would look through the backs of the cards. Then he lifted a segment off, and calmly turned up the diamond ace.

Haid looked as if he would tear down the place with his bare hands. He swore deep in his chest, stretched out clawed hands, sent the rest of the deck scattering behind the bar.

"Remember the bargain, Haid," the gambler said, thin-voiced. "When you get out of the country, I release your sister." He was swaying on his feet and the Kid suddenly realized how that head wound must have weakened him by now.

Haid said something that sounded

like "all right." He and Burgee turned for the door. Almost at it, Burgee flung up his hand in signal to those outside. It was a prearranged play if they lost the bet. Then the maddened Haid was coming around, drawing from a hideout shoulder holster, and big Burgee, jumping sideward, was going for gun steel too.

But they hadn't reckoned with the incredible speed of the Kid. His guns cleared holster leather with that wizardry of the cross-arm draw, and even as Haid triggered, the Kid's guns were spouting.

It was fast and brief. Haid pitched backward, his right shooting shoulder smashed, then Burgee fired into the ceiling as all hell broke loose outside. Burgee fired high because the Kid's third slug had clipped him alongside the head. He dropped, unconscious.

Roaring, Haid turned and bolted out the door. But the tigerish Kid was after him. Staggering Haid leaped off the steps, turnd to try to get up his gun again. And then the Kid drilled him dead center in the neck. Pinto Haid sat down in the road, blood burbling from his throat, then he rolled over before the dust had started to settle around him.

It broke the heart of his bunch when they saw their leader go down. Mike and his mates had been ready for trouble on the porch, had returned the fire when the double-crossing lobo's men cut loose at the signal from Burgee. They began to skulk off, to slip up the road to their ponies. Then they began to run....

IT WAS done. Peace had returned once again to Headstone. There was a crowd gathered out front, a sawbones working on men in the barroom. The two marshals, just returned from a fruitless search for the Kid whom they believed had jumped town, had arrived and were in charge of things. Burgee had talked a heap, admitted his brother-in-law, the dead Pinto, had been in the pay of Travis to make it look as if Malson was raiding the range. Doris Holt sat over in a corner, very pale and tight-lipped.

Then the Kid took over. He pulled out that ten dollar good-luck piece of Burgee's who sat lapping up a drink, head bound up. The coin he'd found outside after the slaying of Link Turner back at Broken Butte. And Burgee's eyes bulged to give him away as he stared at the luckpiece he'd been noted for believing in so much.

"My—" he started.

The Kid nodded. "I found it outside the house where Link Turner got killed at Broken Butte," the Kid said. "That's the second killing against you, Burgee! Now—"

Burgee slammed down his glass so that the whiskey spilled. "I was never near that house," he yelled. "I can prove it. I got witnesses to that I was miles away that night, damn you, Strant!"

The Kid said, "I found it there. It's yours; it'll be my word against yours at the trial. So—"

Burgee's head twisted to his wife in the corner. "I wasn't there! I can prove it, by Gawd! She did it—not me! By Gawd, yes."

Then the Kid realized what a cold-blooded woman she was. She nodded, calmly. "Yes—I did it when I slipped outside that night. I did it—for a rat like you, Mike Burgee!"

One of the marshals whistled in amazement. The Kid and the Professor walked out into the sunlight. The latter started to thank Solo. Solo checked him. Thanks always embarrassed him.

"I got to take a little pasear down the line, Professor." He was thinking of his paint horse that had been down at the livery stable since the first night he'd come to Headstone. After some of the mangy ornery human critters he'd been battling, it would be nice to get around some decent mount like his paint pony again....

Every mornin', Sandy goes out to train with the bear.

Sampson Gets a Haircut

By Percy Brown

It was a dangerous thing, making Sandy Samson train with a bear for his coming fight with Gus Greer — but that was the only hope we had, because Gus would sure kill the youngster otherwise!

THE RUCKUS started right after the stage pulled in. A coppery-haired girl got off and she carried herself proud and straight and I recognized her right off as Judy Westmore, old Maverick Westmore's daughter, who'd been back East, sopping up some book-learning. She stepped near the building as she started past a clump of men standing in front of the Crow's Nest Saloon, and a swinging door suddenly popped open striking her with a resounding whack where she probably ain't

been hit since she was a little shaver.

Judy whipped about, looked up at a huge, puffy-faced man and, proving that a Westmore is a Westmore, finishing school or not, said, "Watch what you're doing, you big lug!"

Gus Greer leered. "Cutie, I was just leavin' the joint in a hurry—"

That's as far as he got. A smallish cowboy stepped up, grabbed Gus by the shoulder and spun him about.

"Drift!" said the cowpoke. "I came to see Miss Westmore home!"

Gus sure looked surprised, and I guess I did too. The spunky cowboy was none other than Sandy Samson, a likable cuss who'd worked for the Bar O since his knee-pants days. He wore his mahogany-colored hair in a long pompadour, and we often ribbed him about imitating Samson Number One, the gent who was stronger than all get-out.

Finally a twisted grin began creeping across Gus' broad face. "You aimin' to horn in on this argyment?" he asked, his voice eager, almost pleading for an affirmative reply.

Sandy didn't bat an eye. "I'll side with Miss Westmore any day in the week," he said flatly.

Sandy had kind of sparked Judy before she went away to school, but he sure must have been in love to stand up to Gus like that. Gus was the town tough. And the big man sure didn't like Sandy's attitude, either; he promptly bellowed for all to hear, "Maybe you'd like to step in the back alley and shoot it out!"

A man couldn't live in Rockville if he ignored a challenge like that, and my heart almost stopped beating as I strained my ears to catch Sandy's reply. The suspense must have been too much for Black Bill, who stood near me; he swallowed a cud of chewing tobacco and started gasping and sputtering.

By the time I'd pounded the breath back into Black Bill, I heard Sandy say something about being too busy just then—he was more interested in taking Judy home.

This seemed kind of thin, and I was afraid Sandy was hedging, kind of; and Gus must have thought so too, for he folded his arms and kind of rocked back and forth on his heels. "I'll wait!" he said.

Then I got the surprise of my life. Sandy flared up like a pine knot. "Listen," he said, "let's settle this like men—with bare fists!"

Gus licked his puffy lips. "That'll be swell, chum!"

Sandy glanced toward the alley. I could see his chest kind of puffing out, and I knew he was about to make a rash proposal, even before he nodded toward an old shed out that way and said, "We'll settle it in there next Saturday at 9:00 p.m.—the winner'll be the one that comes out under his own power—"

Just then a gang of men came tearing out of the Crow's Nest, jostling everybody around, trying to get the low-down on the fuss. Taking advantage of this lull in the proceedings, so to speak, Judy took hold of Sandy's arm and they went on down the broadwalk. The girl seemed kind of worried, but Sandy was smiling and talking, apparently unaware that he'd just made a date to get his head beat off.

Gus stood, hands on hips, looking at the couple until they turned the corner, then he walked away, kind of bouncing on the balls of his feet, like prizefighters often do.

The crowd was all trying to talk at once when Hal Dobe, the Bar O foreman, stepped up to me and said, "Who's to blame, Rusty?"

"Love is," I said. "It's made Sandy forget he's not as big and strong as Samson Number One."

By now all eleven of the Bar O cowboys are milling around like a herd of lightning-spooked steers, every one trying to tell his version of the fuss. Finally, Hal singled out Black Bill and me and said, "Come on, fellers, let's go square things with Gus—Sandy won't have a chance with that elephant."

WELL, WE found gGus in the Blue Front, buying the drinks for the house and telling a gang

of loafers how he's to meet Sandy for a finish fight, come next Saturday.

We tried to get Gus to overlook the whole thing, but he scoffed us down with, "He don't know how tough I am—I'll learn 'em a lesson!"

We tried to explain that Sandy was no match for him, but Gus wouldn't listen. He seemed glad for an opportunity to further demonstrate his ability as a scrapper.

When we reported back to the boys at the Crow's Nest that Gus wouldn't call off the fight, their day off was ruined. The sun had barely set when the whole Bar O crew crawled on their ponies and lit out for the ranch, every last man cold sober.

We were in the bunkhouse, trying to pass the time playing poker, when Sandy breezed in about midnight, his head in the clouds. It seems that Judy had just as good as told him that she would someday become Mrs. Samson.

The entire Bar O crew tried to impress upon the love-struck waddy that there'd probably be no Mr. Samson, come next Saturday.

This proved wasted effort, however; Sandy's head was higher'n Pine Mountain, and there was no getting him down to earth.

One thing I can say, love—and Sandy Samson's predicament—sure cast a cloud of gloom over the Bar O ranch. A cow outfit's more clannish than a passel of hillbillies, and Hal, being foreman, was head of the clan, you might say. He realized his responsibility, and the next morning he called the boys together for a sort of council of war—that is, all but Sandy. That long-haired cowpoke, also being something of an animal-trainer, was out back of the barn, working with a lynx cat, trying to tame that mess of teeth and claws.

We were mulling over the problem when Black Bill suggested, "Let's bust a laig fer Sandy. They'll have to call the fight off fer awhile an' Gus'll probably fergit the whole affair!"

"That'll cost money for a doctor," Hal objected promptly; which probably explains why he's boss of a big ranch like the Bar O. However, he quickly thought of a way to stall for time without spending cash. "We c'n round up the beef an' start our drive to market," he said. "We'll have Sandy 200 miles from here when Saturday comes—and Gus'll have plenty of time to cool off."

"Them words are spoke like a genuine Solomon," I said.

The rest of the crew approved heartily, and Hal said to me, "Rusty, you go get that animal-trainin' Romeo an' go up to the Pine Creek Pasture an' bring in every horse you c'n find—we'll start roundin' up tomorrow."

WELL, SANDY and I had good luck finding the horses, and we would have made it back to the ranch before sundown if Sandy's animal-trainer complex hadn't got the better of him, so to speak.

The horses were strung out down the Pine Creek Trail, trotting along peaceful-like, when they came to a sharp turn and stopped suddenly, snorting like they'd seen a carload of rattlesnakes.

While I tried to hold the horses from making a break, Sandy rode forward to see what was causing all the ruckus. Sandy reached the bend—and spurred his horse forward at breakneck speed, yelling like a scalp-seeking Indian. The next thing I knew the woods were filled with the dangedest roar you ever heard.

Then all hell broke loose.

The horses, with tails lifted like skunks ready to do business, stampeded, knocking down everything short of saw timber in their wild flight. Darkness would over take us before we could run down those broomtails, I knew, and I was wondering what Hal would say when we reported that we'd lost the whole remuda, when it suddenly dawned upon me that Sandy was no longer yelling like an indian. He was yelling like he needed help. Thinking that his horse had piled up on him, I spurred my pony forward.

When I rounded the bend, I was almost jolted from my saddle by sur-

prise. There Sandy was, yelling at the top of his lungs, his horse dancing around, trying to keep out of reach of a bear. Then as I gawked, I saw that, although the bear didn't seem interested in escaping, he couldn't have if he'd wanted to. Sandy's rope was tight around the critter's neck!

Despite the bear's terrific roars and growls, I managed to understand Sandy sufficiently to gather that he wanted me to hurry and also drop my loop over the bear's head. That's all that would keep the critter from making hash out of Sandy and his horse.

By booting my pony's ribs half in I managed to get him near enough to lasso the bear. Held by ropes from opposite directions, the animal was as helpless as a kitten, almost.

When I told Sandy what had happened to the remuda, he shrugged. "Well, what's been done can't be undone today. Let's take this bear to the ranch. I'll make a pet out of him before you know it."

I reckon I should have forseen what would happen when we showed up at the ranch with a bear in tow and explained what had happened to the remuda, but I guess I'm just a trusting soul.

We were half a mile from the ranch when the entire crew came rushing out to meet us. It seems they'd heard the ruckus set up by the balky bear. Every time we yanked the critter forward with the ropes, he would let out a bawl like a carload of bulls.

The minute Hal came within earshot, he squalled, "What in hell you nitwits think you're doin'—an' where in hell're the horses?"

"The whole herd kind of stampeded from hell to breakfast," I explained meek-like, "just because Sandy caught this here bear."

This bit of news sure hit Hal solid between the eyes. He never said one word all the way back to the ranch. But his face kept getting a deeper reddish-blue all along.

Sandy got Black Bill and a couple of the boys to fasten a chain around the bear's neck while we held it snubbed tight, then we chained the critter to a cottonwood tree. By the time we got through, it was getting kind of dark, but the light was good enough for me to see Hal waiting near the bunkhouse. His face was still the color of a turkey gobbler's snout, and I knew he was all primed to ask some pointed questions.

One thing I can say about Sandy, he didn't duck the issue none. He took full blame for what'd happened, and ended up by saying, "Keep your shirt on, Hal; we can get the horses tomorrow."

But he was sure wrong, there.

HAL ORDERED every Bar O rider to hit the leather at the break of day and help hunt for the horses. And I reckon it was a good thing that the entire crew went out. We found but 18 horses out of the 70 that had stampeded, and every last one of them were stove-up like they had rheumatism. They sure must have tried to run their fool heads off when the bear spooked them.

It was a bedraggled bunch of riders that returned to the ranch that evening—this is, all but Sandy Samson. He didn't seem to have a worry in the world. The minute we got in, he took a jack rabbit he'd killed out to feed the bear.

Sandy'd no more than turned his back when Hal called the crew together and explained, "Well, the roundup's off—we can't get the remuda together before Saturday, an' anyway the horses'll be too stove-up to use for a week or two—"

Just then the bear bellowed like a wart-tailed bull, and we looked toward the cottonwood tree and saw the critter slap the rabbit right out of Sandy's hand. He didn't stop there, either. He followed up with a fast right and left. The cowboy managed to duck the bone-crushing blows and scramble out of the bear's reach.

"Say," yelped a bug-eyed cowpoke, "our problem's solved. Sandy can use the bear for a sparrin' partner—either way it goes the issue will be

settled to the complete satisfaction of all concerned. If the bear can't kill 'im, maybe he'll have a chance with Gus Greer. If the bear does kill 'im, that'll cheat Gus from showin' up a Bar O waddy as a weaklin'!"

Hal must have overlooked the possibility of Sandy's getting chewed up by the bear and needing the services of a doctor, for he agreed to this proposal. Backed up by the entire crew, the foreman laid the law down to Sandy.

"It's high time you began trainin' for the fight," he said; "an' the bear's been elected your sparrin' partner!"

Sandy objected. In fact, he set up quite a howl; but it didn't do him no good. Four of the boys grabbed him and hustled him toward the bear.

Sandy kept mumbling something about Philistines, but we didn't pay no attention to him. He was always saying something about foreigners that didn't make no sense.

That workout was a sight to see The boys gave Sandy a shove toward the bear, and the critter reared up on his hind feet and came at the cowpoke with his arms w i d e, like he hankered to hug the waddy mightily. Sandy side-stepped and the animal hit the end of the chain. I thought he would uproot the tree. But he didn't. And it didn't hurt him none, either. He jumped to his feet, and, bellering at the top of his lungs, started throwing rights and lefts that would have killed a bull. He had Sandy on the run, and would have killed him for sure if the chain hadn't again brought him up short.

By some miracle Sandy came out of that first workout all in one piece.

THE NEXT morning, when the training was resumed, Sandy again acted like a balky horse. He didn't want nothing to do with that bear. To get Sandy to face the animal, we had to stand in kind of a circle, keeping him and the critter in the center. This time Sandy was luckier —or more careful. The bear never did come closer than a foot of taking the cowboy's head off.

And that's the way the next few workouts were. Sandy kept strictly out of the bear's way and didn't give the critter much chance to do his stuff. The cowpoke didn't have his heart in the workouts, you might say. This caused us no end of worry— until Black Bill came up with what seemed like a real good idea.

"Let's feed S a n d y raw meat an' cayenne pepper," he said. "I used. to train fightin' roosters an' that'd make 'em fight their shadders!"

When we proposed this diet to Sandy, he objected promptly, and with vigor. But it didn't do him no good. We had to throw him down. I'll admit, but we got some meat and pepper down him. He even chewed Black Bill's thumb half off, but even that didn't change him any. He still wouldn't get near the bear.

That's how things stood when Judy Westmore showed up at the Bar O one day, hankering to have an audience with Sandy. That wasn't hard to get, seeing as we kept him kind of under guard. We w e r e taking no chances of him skipping his workouts.

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She had a lot on her mind, it seems. but what really hurt Sandy was when she told him that everyone in Rockville was laughing about him using a bear as a sparring partner. He would be the laughing-stock of the whole valley if he didn't watch out.

He didn't tell her that this bear business hadn't been his idea. "People ought to tend to their own business," was all he said.

"But they aren't," she insisted; "and I don't want them to laugh at you."

"That's all right," he said. "The Samsons usually get the last laugh!"

Whether Judy's visit gave Sandy new spirit, or whether the raw beef and cayenne pepper finally took hold, we weren't sure, but he showed plenty of spunk in his next workout. Fact is, he seemed to have too much nerve for his own good. He bounced around the bear like a rubber ball, duckling and weaving, keeping out of the critter's reach but tantalizing him into charging. That sure was an exciting show; but most of the crew opined that Sandy'd been too reckless. They allowed we'd given him too much meat and pepper.

However, Sandy seemed to get more reckless each time he faced the beast. The bear also showed decided improvement each time he tried to kill the cowboy.

The last few workouts were a sight to see. The critter'd silently stalk the cowpoke, walking on his hind feet, taking his time until he was about within reach, then he'd sup-was about with in reach, then he'd suddenly leap f o r w a r d, slapping rights and lefts with the speed of a hurricane-whipped windmill. How he kept from killing Sandy, the Lord only knows.

When Saturday morning finally rolled around, Sandy refused to go to town with the rest of the Bar O crowd. "I got to take care of myself," he said; "but tell Gus I'll be there at nine, sharp."

Some of the boys figgered Sandy might skip out and leave the country, but Hal reminded them that Judy Westmore would be there—and no love-struck cowboy would let his girlfriend down.

WHEN FIGHT time drew near it sure looked like Gus would win—by default. At 8:30 Sandy had not put in his appearance, and the Bar O boys grew nervous. It looked king of like Sandy had sure enough rode over the hill.

When 8:45 rolled around and no Sandy showed up, the whole Bar O bunch was fit to be tied. We kept our eyes glued to the clock on the Blue Front back bar as it ticked off the seconds.

Just at 8.50 the doors swung open and in stepped Sandy. "Well, Gus," he announced calmly, "I g u e s s we better be going."

Gus licked his lips. "I was afraid you'd tucked your tail an' run."

"I can see you are the same old Gus," Sandy said easily.

Both men seemed to ooze confidence, but the crowd was as jittery a herd of mavericks. And the procession down the dimly lit street to the shed was a sight to behold. Even women and children luged heavy kerosene lanterns and fell in and stepped right along with the men.

The minute the crowd reached the shed, Sam Crudy, the marshal, cleared his throat like he was going to make a political speech. "I'll open the door when the winner knocks twice," he said.

Both contestants nodded, then Gus opened the door and stepped into the ink-black room. Sandy was right behind him.

The door barely slammed shut when all hell broke loose in the shed. First, there was a s i c k e n i n g "Splaatt!" as a mighty blow connected with bare flesh. Then, almost immediately, the shed shook to the tune of "Rummetty-thump, r u m m e t t y-thump," and the c r o w d sucked in their breath in horror. Somebody was getting the beating of a lifetime.

Black Bill pulled his pistol and yelled, "Let me in there—I got as much right to shoot Gus as he has to kill Sandy!"

Sam Crudy stood his ground, but by the time he got Black Bill to shut up, the shed was as quiet as a tomb. The fight was over.

Seconds ticked by. Finally there came two firm raps on the door.

Somebody in the crowd gasped. "Gus is bringin' 'im out, now!"

This was when I realized somebody was squeezing my arm. I looked around. It was Judy! She didn't say a word. She just stood there, kind of biting her lips.

I patted her hand. "He'll git all right," I predicted with more confidence than I felt. "He's probably only got a few broken bones!"

JUST THEN Sam opened the door—and a wild yell went up from the crowd. Sandy, none the worse from wear, stepped out, dragging the battered-up Gus by the back of the collar.

The prettiest smile I ever saw came to Judy's face. "A miracle has happened," she said sort of soft-like. "But it won't have to happen again. Sandy seems to have some of the most foolish notions imaginable—but I'll humor him—a haircut should set him on the right track!"

Sandy was surrounded by well-wishers, but when he spotted Judy he hurried over. "You shouldn't have come." he said.

"I couldn't stay away,' she said.

"If I mean that much to you, you ought to marry me, then."

"I will," she promised, "if you'll do one thing. You'll have to wear your hair shorter—if you know what I mean. You don't know your own strength and someday you might kill somebody—I couldn't be married to a a killer."

"I'll do it, Judy, just for you," he said. They started walking away, but he suddenly excused himself and came back and whispered to me kind of low-like: "Rusty, meet me back of the shed in 15 minutes—it was an easy job to train the bear to fight without roaring his head off, but I had a devil of a time getting him to town and chained in the shed where Gus would be sure to bump into him!"

THE GRUB LINE

THE MAN WHO FED TOMBSTONE

by Harry Van Demark

MEMORIES of the gay, glorious and guzzling—almost blood-letting past—of Tombstone, Arizona, some time ago paid tribute in enduring form to the memory of one Quong Kee, an aged Chinese cook. Though the venerable master of the kitchen had been buried some time before at the expense of his friends, the discovery that no headstone marked his grave caused quite a stir in America's most notorious Ghost City.

So, the Crystal Palace Saloon, where all movements worthy and otherwise, have long started in Tombstone, there was a "pass-the-hat" drive for funds to guarantee payment for a granite shaft to mark the final resting place of the beloved Oriental. Upon the stone was chiseled the record of Quong Kee's virtues as cook, philosopher and friend.

Quong Kee was the answer to a Christmas prayer of a tough mining settlement for grub that white men could eat. It was on the morning of

December 25, 1879, at the age of thirty-one, smiling and husky and fresh from the Comstock district of California, with $2,000 in gold strapped around his waist, that the genial Chinaman arrived in Tombstone.

At that time, the place, which within a year was to blossom into "Tombstone, the Magnificent," and governing seat of Cochise Country, with a population of 20,000 was only a sparse collection of miserable shacks and raggedy tents.

Spectacular was the descent of the Chinese cook upon the mining camp. He breezed in, driving two fractious mules, attached to an old chuck wagon which had one time belonged to Uncle Sam. The rattle-trap vehicle was not only laden with all the equipment for a small restaurant, but also a goodly supply of edibles, including even two crates of live-fowl.

Within an hour of his arrival, the enterprising Oriental had swapped his mules and wagon for a shack. He had come to stay. At noon, Quong Kee was serving ham and eggs at $1.75 a portion.

From that day until his death a few years since at the age of ninety, his life story was to be but a parallel of the tragic history of Tombstone. During the mining town's short-lived era—exactly six years—of affluence and prosperity almost beyond the imagination, Quong Kee amassed a huge fortune.

In 1885 a miner's pick started water flowing in the silver "diggin's." It was a fateful day. The doom of a live, hustling and wide awake city had been sounded. Almost over night Tombstone's population shrunk from its boom-days peak of 20,000 to a mere 1000 souls.

Only the hopeful remained behind, banking their all on the day when the water would be drained out of the mines. Heartening to them was the fact that at a depth of only 500 feet lay amazingly rich stores of silver. Quong Kee was one who stuck to Tombstone to the end. As the town faded and shriveled, so did the Chinese cook and his fortune.

THE FIRST mine in that region was discovered in the spring of 1879 by the hardy prospector, Edward Schieffelin, who became a millionaire along with a host of others who were early on the scene. But seven years after making his stake, Schieffelin and all the wise ones had shaken the dust of Tombstone from their feet. They well knew the meaning of water in the mines.

A few good producing surface holes, like the "million dollar stope" in the rear of the old courthouse on Fifth Street, were, however, to postpone the complete collapse of the town for several years. But in 1890 Tombstone had definitely taken its place among the ghost cities of America.

The first to move out upon learning that the pay-dirt era was at an end, were the gamblers, gunmen, crooks, cattle rustlers, horse thieves and painted ladies of the dance halls. Soon the saloon-keepers were on the move and then the business men. The town awoke one morning to discover that it was no longer the county seat of Cochise and that the judges, the sheriff and the political somebodies had also vanished.

Indeed times had changed! The Crystal Palace was closed. During the early eighties it would have been ablaze with a wild, whiskey-drinking mob—would have been ablaze with lights from dozens of kerosene reflector lamps. And outside, the corner of Allen & Fifth Streets would have been thronged with as rough and ribald a lot of humans as ever dodged the law.

Just before it closed its doors the Crystal Palace was robbed of $400 by safe-breakers, who made a clean getaway. For some of Tombstone's former residents that would have been "small change." Those were the laddies who specialized in the stoping of stage coaches and frequently escaped into the sagebrush country with as much as $50,000 in cash.

There were also the boys who used to get a thrill, as well as a lot of

coin, in driving a herd of cattle—sometimes as many as 500—into the Mexican fastness just across the border.

Had he been around to hear the story, Quong Kee would probably have gotten a great laugh out of the cheap robbery of the Crystal Palace Saloon. It was in that same institution, one November night in 1883, that the Chinese cook quit a "three card monte" game with $27,000 in cash and a one-sixth share in a paying silver mine.

It was during those days that Quong enjoyed the friendship of Wyatt Earp and his brothers, as well as being on chummy terms with the frail and tubercular Doc Holliday, the quick-shooting dentist from Georgia.

Since the most noted killers of the town were steady patrons of Quong's restaurant, they were ever on the alert to protect their Chinese friend from visiting gunmen. Because of his competency as a chef, the Oriental was regarded as a chef, the Orient-treasure of the whole community, regardless of factions.

Between the Earp-Holliday group and the Clanton boys there was deadly enmity. When the Clanton crowd —Billie and Ike Clanton and Tom and Frank McLowery—decided to shoot it out with the Earps in the O. K. Corral, there was a hasty and undignified flight to cover on the part of all those without interest in the quarrel.

THROUGHOUT that famous melee, which ended with all of the Clanton crowd but one being carried to the Boothill graveyard, Quong Kee, apparently unmindful of the flying lead, was a most interested observer. All through the battle he remained perched on the corral's swinging rail gate, as cool and calm as if he were turning an amelet. As they were carrying the dead out, the Oriental blandly remarked to the sheriff:

"Me lose three customers, velly quick, right now!"

In Kee's restaurant occurred quite a few shootings. But the Chinaman never allowed "Amelican man's business" to interfere with his culinary duties. Cooking, not shooting, was his chief concern in life.

Came the time then, not so many years ago, when the old chef was found in a comatose state in his Tumble-down Tombstone shack, from where he was removed to the county hospital at Douglas. When he passed away his body was dumped into a pauper's grave in Bisbee.

When Tombstone learned of the treatment accorded the remains of the aged Chinese, a fund was quickly subscribed and Quong Kee's body brought home and interred with pomp and ceremony in Boothill Graveyard.

In the deserted burying ground of the old ghost city—the resting place of most of Tombstone's professional bad men—there had not been an interment since 1906. Strangely, too, the last person buried in Boothill was a Chinese woman. Often had Quong Kee voiced the hope that when the end came he might be laid beside her.

Quong's friends of the gory yesterdays were not among those present at the obsequies—many of them having preceded him to Boothill. Yet his funeral cortege attested the esteem and affection in which he was held by his later friends and acquaintances. Notable figures in the public life of Arizona were among the pallbearers, while officiating at the commital services was the Reverend Rupert Wirt of St. Paul's Episcopal Church of Tombstone, assisted by Ronald Bridges, rector of the Congregational Church.

From the scene of his fame, glories and triumphs—as well as bitter sorrows and disappointments— Old Quong had departed. The last link between the past and present of Tombstone had been severed.

For Boothill Graveyard, the burial marked an event in its history. Tombstone had since decreed the closure of the historic cemetery. It will always be remembered that Quong Kee

was the last to be received in the old grounds. In the days when the Chinese cook was growing rich in feeding the citizens and floating populapassed without a funeral at Boothill —usually a victim of six-shooter trouble. Some of the most notorious outlaws of the Southwest are buried in that little patch of rough and rock-strewn ground which Tombstone dedicated to its dead in 1880.

The decision to place a granite shaft over the final resting place of Quong Kee was to let the world at large know that Boothill also guards the bones of at least a few worthy and respectable individuals.

STRANGE as it may seem, "The Town Too Tough To Die" has long maintained Boothill Graveyard to refute all rumors to the contrary. Approaching the town from the West one learns of arrival within the corporate limits through a sign bearing the legend:

"Welcome to Tombstone and Boothill Graveyard."

Truly informative is the sign. It records not only the names of all the desperadoes enjoying their last sleep in Boothill, but also the manner in which they were gathered into their fathers. For instance.

"Tom McLowery, Frank McLowery and Billie Clanton, killed in Earp-Clanton battle, September 26, 1881."

"Dan Down, Red Sample, Tex Howard, Billy De Laey and Dan Kelly, hanged legally by Sheriff J. E. Ward for the Bisbee Massacre.."."John Heath, lynched by the Bisbee mob, February 22, 1884," and continuing in such fashion with other sudden endings.

But beneath the rocks and gravel of Boothill there rests no Earp. Only one of the five Earp brothers "Died standin' up and shootin'," and his body was shipped out of town. The rest of them like Doc Holliday, died in bed.

Holliday, hailing originally from Georgia, was a cold and merciless killer. Nothing ever happened to him in Tombstone, since the law always held his shootings as perfectly justifiable. The survivor in a gun battle simply had to prove—often by living witnesses—that he fired in self-defense.

For quite a while after the leave taking of the Earps and Holliday, Tombstone was to maintain its reputation as a place where life was most uncertain. Then came the day when a new and dominant personality was to grace the scene—one John Slaughter, appropriately named, too—last of Tombstone's fighting sheriffs. He came to clean up the town. He succeeded beyond words.

Slaughter was the sole embodiment of the law. Except when he had to shoot quickly and without time for questioning, it was his custom to offer a desperado two choices—boots and saddles or Boothill. Only fools were rash enough to hesitate.

Bullet-Bride For A Banker

By Cliff Campbell

(Author of "School — Six Gun Style")

Gil Martin and Shorty McGill had the knack of starting off on the wrong foot — like when they beat up the banker they wanted to borrow money from!

GIL MARTIN, of the solemn face and quizzical gray eyes, and Shorty McGill, redhaired and roundfaced, were back in Sallejo valley after six years saddle drifting. They arrived unannounced, having the word that the placer boom town of Sallejo, was being washed out.

"The whole valley will go back to beef, Shorty," stated Gil Martin. "But I didn't plan on being here to welcome a new mail order bride for that sanctimonious 'Deacon' Carnes. I'm wonderin' if this getting married up sudden like has anything to do with Deacon Carnes knowing the valley and his bank are going busted?"

"I wouldn't know," complained Shorty. "But our S-J spread up under the lake is about the only graze can be put back to pure bred beef. Them down below the sluicing creeks are plumb ruined; maybe this mail order bride has dinero."

"Whether she has or not, we have to make a stab at borrowin' from the Deacon to restock our spread," stated Gil Martin. "If it ain't put back to cattle, then Sallejo Valley will be ghosted out and Deacon Carnes will be left nothin' but a sluiced-out boom town and a busted bank—even if he has grabbed most of the old ranches while the gold rush was chasing out the best cowmen in Colorado."

The long absent owners of the S-J

iron shagged down toward the crowd waiting for the night stage from Arapahoe.

Gil Martin and Shorty McGill had saddle-bummed all over in the six years since they had shaken the first placer mucking mud from their boots. The oddly matched partners might have stuck it out and made the S-G iron pay out by feeding the suddenly booming town; but the hell-roaring riffraff, tinhorns and other out-and-out crooks hadn't fitted into what had been the tough, drought-and-blizzard fighting, but otherwise good and cheerful life of the S-G mountain meadow spread.

Sure enough, the cowhands of the Sallejo valley spreads put on their hell-tooting payday nights in town. But the town hadn't been much then except a couple of saloons, two stores, a saddle shop and a few other shacks. Almost overnight it had swelled to a hell's trail tent city, then to a jam-packed, lawless town of several thousands.

The ever-flowing creeks of the Sallejo, including the Hawk Nest lake supplying the S-G, were diverted to the sluices that changed goat-whiskered Deacon Carnes suddenly from a long-praying, leader of religion into a banker, a land speculator and a mortgage grabber.

"Don't be forgettin', Shorty," cautioned Gil Martin, "that me an' you have been reported in the weekly Sallejo Salute as everything from stage-robbin' owlhoots to gunslicks an' saddle bums. An' with the gold placer flurry fast slippin' out from under Deacon Carnes, we've got a bank ratin' a few notches lower than a sheep-herder. You look after the new bride while I'm talking loan."

"Same as sayin' I'm branded to kiss some wornout old gal the way I'd grab some nice honkytonker with a Mex accent after the second quart of hooch," growled Shorty.

Gil Martin's sleepy, quizzical eyes viewed him with a cynicism that would have turned a palsied, half blind grandma into a busher with murder only on her mind.

At the moment of this rawhiding between the pudgy. Shorty and the long-geared, lean-flanked, wide shouldered Gil Martin, the stage from Arapahoe arrived in a flurry of dust. Never perturbed or bending dignity, tall Deacon Carnes, with his sparse, goat-like chin whiskers, the only known silk topper in Sallejo, and his long-tailed black coat and freshly down white shirt, marched down the dusty street. His pale eyes reflected his hypocritical meanness.

SEEING THAT about all of their dinero was in the Deacon's bank, the hoorawing, sky-shooting townsfolk made way for him. Gil Martin, in spite of his need for fifty thousand to put the S-G iron into new beef production had a twitch of a grin on his mouth, that was too wide for his long face.

Out of the stage now stopping was to emerge the future *Missus Carnes.* Shorty's idea of a sour-faced old maid or a drab widow was not Gil's picture of things to come. Hell! She'd have found out that Deacon Carnes owned everything in sight. He was parsimonous, true, and had his own residence built into a second story up over the bank.

Gil was watching the stage door to see a beruffled, much painted, probably a bit faded, but still a pretty gal. Gil was shocked more than Shorty. He'd expected a smart, gold-digging hussy.

Guns banged and there was a crowd roaring. Into this stepped a young, sweet-faced, calm-eyed girl. She was something that Gil had seen in picture books, with her coiled hair and her perfectly fitted gray dress with the somehow snow-white neckpieces.

Gil was still looking into the stage. But she was the only woman passenger. Moreover, her warm brown eyes settled upon Deacon Carnes. There was a sudden hush.

"You're Mr. Carnes," the girl stated rather than questioned. "I'm Alice Ladd. I'll call you Matt. I've only two carpetbags for you to bring along. It being 'most sundown, I'll go to the hotel for tonight."

Gil felt his hackles start to rise. The girl extended her hand. Deacon Carnes held his back as straight as if he'd seen somebody grab a penny out of the church collection plate. He

ignored the girl's proffered hand, but he spoke harshly with strident command, "My own place at the bank is better, I'll stay at the hotel. Gabe, bring along the bags; I'll give you a dime."

Gabe was a halfwit saloon rouster. At the Deacon's short words that held no greeting, a few townsmen cussed under their breath and fell back. But two younger fellows who had come to meet the stage had the sense to try and cover the Deacon's boorish manner, as Gil, saw a red flush come up the girl's rounded throat and spot her cheeks.

"Howdy, Mrs—Miss Ladd," stammered one of the young fellows, reaching to take her hand. "We're all sure glad you got here safe."

"Why, thanks," said the girl, and took the proffered hand.

The other young fellow grinned and said, "Me, too, Miss Ladd."

Gil had met them here and there and everywhere. But he thought he'd never seen a more friendly, heart-warming smile than the girl showed. She again extended her hand. "It's nice of you boys."

"Good women don't go around shaking hands with strangers!" burst from Deacon Carnes.

With his words, the Deacon slapped out roughly and knocked the girl's hand to one side. Gil Martin was several feet away. It also must have come to him you don't slam a sock to the chin of a man you're hoping to borrow from and who happens to be the banker and virtually the town's boss.

Yes, it may have come to him. But Gil Martin took two strides and punched all the way from the level of his hip.

The Deacon's neatly trimmed goatee was all mixed up with his loosened teeth and the blood from his split, thin lips as he went down. For the moment the Sallejo groom-to-be stared at the sky with vacant eyes.

"An' that washes up our quaint notion of gittin' ary loan to put blooded livestock onto our nice, empty twenty thousan' acres o' S-R medder," muttered Shorty McGill.

It was only his funereal manner of duding himself up that made Deacon Carnes appear to be a much older man than lanky Gil Martin. But that didn't save Gil from the sudden storm in brown eyes that spoke for themselves of the girl's goodness and purity.

Miss Alice Ladd was down beside the Deacon, trying to stop the blood from his mouth with a wispy hanky that must have been one of the first of its kind west of the Mississippi. Her voice smoked with anger.

"You should feel might heroic, hitting an old man twice your age, mister! It's a shame that the town Mr. Carnes built up has to have roughnecks like you!" Which confirmed Gil's belief the mail-order gal was just the little lady to blackjack the Deacon.

GIL MARTIN swallowed once hard, but his nearly always smiling gray eyes were suddenly as sardonic as his snapped reply.

"Thankin' you, ma'am, for your opinion." His broad mouth was twisted, and the Martin temper cut loose. "I'd say you look young enough to be his gran'daughter, but I only pasted the old hypocrite; I ain't marryin' him!"

The sudden. troubled look in the girl's eyes cooled his temper, and he turned away. Bart Danvers, the blacksmith who had known Gil since he had been a button, touched his arm.

"You damn sudden jigger, Gil," said Danvers; "it's only maybe on account of the gal an' this jam around the Deacon that you ain't stoppin' lead. Have a quick look at that scrawny, pinch-faced fella over there with his guns tied, an' you're seein' Ace Fonde. In back of you is Jim Ensler, with his flat nose and part of an ear missing. Them two is rated the fastest lead throwers this damn' town has ever seen. They're the Deacon's own boys, in his pay, an' they'll be right close for the weddin'. I've got another notion, but—"

But he didn't tell his other notion. The big blacksmith moved away suddenly. The pinch-faced Ace Fonde he'd pointed out was weaving toward the girl, Deacon Carnes and Gil Mar-

tin with snake-like quickness.

The flat-nosed Jim Ensler came into the center of the group the other way and Gil Martin swore under his breath. There was a sudden fading away of the hoorawing crowd that had met the stage to welcome the mail ordered bride of Deacon Carnes.

Gil Martin didn't move. He was wearing only the one gun and he didn't rate himself any too fast with that. He was watching the beady-eyed Ace Fonde. Shorty had heard Bart Danvers' warning, and he was squared around facing the flat-nosed Jim Ensler.

Gil Martin rated himself a first-class lunkhead for having returned to Sallejo without informing himself more of the general setup. But Shorty and he had slept out up on the S-R and they'd heard about Deacon Carnes' having a bride-to-be on the way from the East only after hitting the rapidly dissolving boom town this morning.

There had been enough news of the Sallejo valley filtered to Gil and Shorty to keep them informed when the creek placers began to wash out with no sign of any paying lode being discovered. With that had come some word of the financial rise of Deacon Carnes, and this had included strong hints that the good, long-praying Deacon had given over the general store for the collecting of dust and nuggets from the numerous streams originating in Hawk Nest lake.

THERE WAS another angle. Numerous good cow ranches were left dry by the mucking of the creeks. Below the secured and amply snow-fed Hawk Nest lake had lain the Cliff Fanchard mustang training spread. It seemed to get in the way of a big washing outfit.

The range had three abundant creeks. By a bit of financial magic all three creeks were turned into one sluicing stream. As Gil Martin got the story, Cliff Fanchard owed Deacon Carnes on loans with which he was intending to bring in sturdy Percheron stock.

By odd coincidence Fanchard's saddle horse broke through a bridge rail into one of the larger creeks. Then, although the Sallejo Salute announced that Deacon Carnes had advertised for some Fanchard heir, it had appeared the luckless Deacon was left with all of the Fanchard horse ranch on his hands.

Odd accidents, fatal rustler raids and strange coincidence like that had given Deacon Carnes nearly fully control of all such land as could be turned back when the hell roaring gold rush would be over. The Deacon's sudden desire to hitch up and share his wealth with some cultured Eastern woman came as a surprise.

Apparently it had worked out, and here was a prize bit of womanhood that Gil Martin had abruptly decided shouldn't become a slave to the whims of the churchgoing scoundrel who prayed the loudest and the longest now in the Sallejo church, built by the easy money that had for six years mired down the valley cattle business.

But here was Deacon Carnes spitting out loose teeth from his bleeding mouth. Even under such stress the pale eyes of the town boss oozed benevolence. However, Gil Martin analyzed the Deacon's expression in the same class as that of a cotton-mouthed moccasin about to do a helpless frog the favor of swallowing it alive.

Alice Ladd, the girl whose sharp tongue had razooed Gil Martin, was helping the still stunned Deacon to his feet. Gil hooked a thumb above his .45 as he saw the Deacon's eyes dart from the snaky gunman, Ace Fonde, to his uglier cohort, Jim Ensler. A side jerk of the Deacon's head indicated this was not the time or place to start a shoot-out with the partners of the S-R range, where the Hawk' Nest lake really controlled the future rebuilding of the valley.

Alice Ladd gave Gil Martin a sudden, brief glance. His snappy comeback at her reference to hitting an old man may have been the reason for the sudden attempt to probe into Gil Marrin's mind.

Gil's usually quizzical, mocking eyes were out of harmony with his long, bony face, but they were nearly always a good throw-off as to what he might really be thinking. Gil had been lightning in reading the Deacon's sig-

nal to his two gunmen that this was not the time to start gunsmoke.

Knowing the Deacon was in a furious rage over having been knocked down, this abrupt holding off of his hired trigger men sounded a warning bell in Gil's reacting mind. Then, too, while it seemed fantastic, Gil Martin could have sworn that this calm, lovely girl was sizing him up as a possible ally rather than an enemy.

"C'mon, Gil," nudged Shorty, much relieved that there had been no gunplay where he didn't count himself as having a chance. "Looks as how we'd might as well begin combing the brush to put beef back on the S-R."

Having cleared his mouth of blood, the Deacon confirmed the notion Shorty had.

"We've been hearin' you S-R fellas have been makin' yourselves some 'at of a gun slingin' rep here an' there," said the Deacon with the unctuous voice of a judge pronouncing a sentence. "Your kind ain't wanted around Sallejo and I still stand ready to make you a reasonable offer for the Hawk Nest range. But I'll have to know you're clearing out in the next twenty-four hours."

Gil Martin ran his tongue along his teeth. He had fully expected that that the sudden return of S-R owners would upset the Deacon."

"We was countin' on stayin' for the weddin', Deacon."

"You ain't invited," stated the Deacon quickly. "I'll expect to hear from you about the Hawk Nest range in time for you to be riding yonderly come this time tomorrow."

Gil Martin guessed he'd never know what made women critters what they are.

"But I'm invitin' them, Matt," said Alice Ladd. "I've heard—I've read in the Sallejo weekly about the Hawk Nest ranch."

Gil Martin held the girl with level eyes.

"We'll be here for the weddin', ma'am," he said flatly.

HE HAD Shorty's arm and got him away quickly. Up near their horses, however, it was Shorty who spoke. "I was meanin' to ask you if you noticed somethin' peculiar about that Alice Ladd? Never knowed she went by the name o' Ladd."

"That's why we're readyin' for trouble, Shorty, " stated Gil Martin. "She's still got that three-cornered scar under her chin that come of her bein' throwed by one of our calves when she was in pigtails and short skirts. I recollect Cliff Fanchard hitchin' up with a young widow over at Bowie. Also I'm recollectin' that her first husband's name was Ladd."

"How come then the gal that was the same as Fanchard's kid is figgerin' on hitchin' up with Deacon Carnes, an' him bein' took in with all his smart mindedness?" demanded Shorty.

Gil Martin's grin was tight and thoughtful.

"The *Missus Carnes* made one slip, Shorty. She mentioned she'd read about Hawk Nest range in the Sallejo weekly. There was a piece in the Sallejo Salute a spell back that said Deacon Carnes was advertisin' for an Eastern gal to hitch up with him. Them marryin' agency folks don't overlook much, an' as I'm recallin' her when she was a brat, Alice Ladd was always right bright."

Shorty shook his head and allowed it was too mixed up for his feeble mind to follow. Gil Martin was watching the ratty Ace Fonde keeping pace with them on the other side of the street. A fighting glint sparked Gil's narrowing gray eyes.

"There goes the Deacon," he said quickly. "Take notice he's had up a sign closin' his bank today an' until after the weddin' that's supposed to be at noon tomorrow. Don't look as if we'd be talkin' ary loan with the Deacon, but we're still supposed to be givin' him somethin' like a figure on the S-R an' Hawk Nest range right pronto. I'm thinkin' us showin' up sudden like was a shock to the good Deacon. But this mail order bride bus'ness, is all a ranny. I'm sayin' the Deacon knows too much about Alice Ladd."

Gil Martin had never been more mixed up in his thinking. He didn't believe the calmly lovely Alice Ladd was here to marry the Deacon. Yet he was thinking she wouldn't be the sort to have a neat little derringer

pocketed somewhere in her sedate dress.

But when he recalled the flashing storm in the girl's brown eyes after he had punched Deacon Carnes, Gil wasn't so sure. "You never can rightly brand that quiet sort of a gal," he said to Shorty. "The ones that do the killin' ain't the same breed that gives you a hint by raisin' hell with their mouths."

"What the seven devils yuh talkin' about?" questioned the puzzled Shorty McGill.

"I ain't so sure myself," grunted Gil. "But put an eye on the Deacon's latest, with them bank windows so damn' clean for once you can't miss what's goin' on. An' all the lamps lit up like a church sociable."

Sallejo wasn't yet a ghost town. With the arrival of the evening stage and the somewhat violent welcome to the Deacon's mail ordered bride, the bright lights of a dozen or more saloons and honkytonks added to the illumination of other places that made the straggling main street like day.

GEORGE HAYES, the driver of the Aropahoe stage, came along with Sam Mall who was still toting the mean sawed-off gun he'd had as the stage's shotgun guard. Hayes held a flat package under one arm.

Hayes hadn't seen Gil Martin and Shorty until now and he held up. They were almost directly across from the Deacon's brightly lighted bank.

"H'lo, Gil," greeted Hayes. "Good for sore eyes to see you an' Shorty. Buy you drinks as soon as I deliver this damn' passel of foldin' money to the Deacon. Reckon you know the creek holes is nigh done. 'Most a half o' the boom rushers has drawed their dinero an' pulled out."

"Heard it was that way, George," said Gil Martin. "I'd surmise there's been a heap o' gold washed out in six years. I suppose them that made a killin' has sent out the heavy stuff an' exchanged for foldin' money they can handle."

Hayes nodded, and added, "The Deacon ain't too happy over the end of the boom neither. I'd guess there's been up to three to four million in washin's went through his bank. He's still holdin' maybe four, five hund'ed thousan', but that's comin' down to the last nubbin. Why, we brung in 'most sixty thousan' in foldin' dinero this trip."

Gil Martin laughed shortly.

"Hell! The Deacon's holdin' a heap o' valley land that'll be put back to grass," said Shorty McGill. "He don't stand to lose nothin'. Maybe the town'll cut back down to cow raisin' size, but the Deacon's still the top dog, includin' gittin' the purtiest gal ever seen in Sallejo valley."

Gil Martin had been riding some that day and he wasn't surprised at what Hayes said then. He wanted his own opinion confirmed.

"Leavin' out the old S-R, an' maybe the Fanchard hoss spread close up under Hawk Nest lake, damned nigh all the Deacon grabbed for little or nothin' ain't worth hell room, Gil. The whole damn' creek valley's been stone mud it won't root enough grass so bad washed over by placer lime-in the next ten years to raise sheep."

Hayes and Mall, the guard, took the package of folding money across into the bank, promising to come back and buy the drinks.

"An' that sanctermon-eous prayer spouter wasn't thinkin' we knowed that, figurin' on buyin' the S-R an' runnin' us out!" spat out Shorty.

"An' when didja find that out, Shorty?" said Gil Martin with a crooked grin. "Nev' mind. He ain't honin' to see the last o' all that easy money to get away. I'm thinkin' he's had a holdin' in all the gamblin' dives an' such, an' he's been writin' his own interest on all the placer gold that's passed through that bank—say! Do you notice somethin', Shorty?"

Shorty rolled his eyes over toward Ace Fonde, the little gunman, slanted a look at the brightly lighted bank and the rest of the town.

"You ain't inferrin' I didn't know what Hayes said an' I've been missin' anything, Gil?"

"Not inferrin', Shorty," said Gil Martin crisply. "Lookin' it over, the Deacon's changed his religion or somethin'. Never knowed him to make a show of his dinero before, no more than he could git under cover. But

maybe he's gone an' fallen in love with his mail order bride. Have a look-see over there, an' keep an eye out for that other gunnie, Jim Ensler."

Some of the townies stopped for a look inside the brightly lighted bank. The lower floor extended to the now wide open door of what Sallejo considered the latest in iron safes, a built-in vault. But the bank building was of light red pine, matching the other structures in the boom-built town.

GIL MARTIN watched George Hayes shove some flat packages of folding money through a window. Half a dozen coal oil lamps were shining upon this and some other folding dinero. At the moment the Deacon evidently had been proudly showing Miss Alice Ladd all of the bank, and they were coming out of the open door of the vault.

If what George Hayes had guessed was correct, there must be a few hundred thousand in placer gold and folding money in that vault. Gil Martin was thinking back to where Bart Danvers, the blacksmith, had mentioned having a notion, but had not told it.

The calm, oval face of the bride-to-be showed plainly. Gil Martin had an idea she was watching Deacon Carnes more than the deposited wealth of others he had been so openly displaying. Gil Martin couldn't be sure but he imagined the girl's right hand touched a ruffled part of her simple dress several times.

"It ain't nowise decent," blurted Shorty McGill. "They ain't been hitched yet and it looks like she's staying at his rooms over the bank."

"Go scrub your mind, if any, Shorty. Can't you see Carlina, the Mex housekeep, waitin' to tuck the visitor in bed an' chaperone the hide off her if she don't behave herself. That ain't the game, you lunkhead. Most of that gold never left Sallejo. The bulk of it is buried in Hawk Nest Lake.

"That's why we're as welcome as a skunk cabbage in a Ladies' Aid Society. And keep low, Shorty. That Ace Fonde ain't got doughnuts in them tied-down irons."

Shorty exclaimed. "Now what's comin' off?"

Hayes and Mall were leaving the bank, its main structure built of the universal pine of the hills. It seemed to Gil Martin that Deacon Garnes dropped the coal oil lamp that exploded.

There was the gunman, Jim Ensler, who hadn't shown until then. Gil Martin saw Jim Ensler stuff packages of folding money into one of Alice Ladd's bags. The Deacon was dashing toward the open vault.

With the first explosion of the coal oil flame from the lamp inside the Deacon's bank, shots cracked from across the street. In one instant Gil Martin was seeing Alice Ladd's white scared face, and in the next the girl had fallen behind the bank counter as if pulled down by some unseen force.

As always when gunsmoke rolled the main street was fast being deserted by all brands of townies and miners, not even the flare by the blaze at the bank having sufficient attraction to hold the mixed citizens in the possible pathway of whistling lead.

It was true that Gil Martin wasn't a gunslinger. Neither was his partner, Shorty. Both were setting ducks for the vicious Ace Fonde, being between the thin-faced killer and the lights and the sudden fire in the bank, or they would have been.

Gil Martin wasn't usually slow thinking, but he was several seconds getting the truth. Ignoring the S-R partners, the Deacon's self confident gunman had sent lead from both his guns sizzling past them. The cold killer had deliberately taken the longer shots at the unsuspecting Alice Ladd, and at least one bullet had reached its target.

IT SEEMED incredible, but it had to be that way. For Ensler, the Deacon's other gunhand, had first been stuffing folding money into the girl's carpet-bag setting on the counter, throwing out its other contents to make room for the money.

At the same time, while the Deacon had apparently been making a dash to close the iron door of the vault, the

banker boss of the town hadn't so much as paused near the vault. His long figure was on the way through a half-opened window at the rear of the building when Gil Martin pulled his confused mind back to figuring what must be the fastest action he could take.

His abrupt impulse was to dart toward the bank, and to hell with Jim Ensler, thegunman. Once flaming, the blaze in the bank was increased suddenly by the bullet smashing of two other lamps.

"That damned sidewinder, Ace Fonde!" yelled Shorty McGill.

Gil Martin's divided his attention long enough to see Shorty, who was slower than molasses on the draw, trying to drag his .45 from his untied holster. The word of Bart Danvers, the blacksmith, was proved.

Without seeming to look or aim, Ace Fonde whirled Shorty half around with a bullet that smashed his arm before he had his gun out of the leather.

"Hit the dirt, you damfool!" yelled Gil Martin. "This was framed, but the Deacon didn't think we'd walk into the middle of it."

The rolling smoke and fire filled nearly all of the bank when Ensler, the gunslick, lifted the bag of Alice Ladd and gave it a toss through the front door into the street. Ensler had one hand on the bank counter to jump over it. His other hand gripped his dragged gun and Gil Martin swore deep inside him.

There could be no doubt but that Ensler was set to plant more lead in the girl who had been shot down. Gil Martin didn't know when or how his own slow draw brought his gun into line. He felt his arm jerk with the explosion, and he saw Ensler, the gunslick, snap his head back, drop his gun and roll on over the counter.

Gil Martin knew then for the first time that the ripping of a bullet into flesh could feel as cold as ice. The lead came from behind and he went to his knees, knowing that Ace Fonde had backshot him.

Gil Martin felt the strength go from his gun arm and his iron slip into the dust. He had a brief, waking nightmare of thinking how the lovely Alice Ladd would be nothing but a charred skeleton when the fire had finished.

Then Gil Martin saw the thin face of Ace Fonde swimming toward him, a killer's grin of hell revealing his yellowed teeth. What then happened rated with the impossible. A pudgy, fat hand picked up the gun he had dropped in the dust.

"Shorty—no—he'll finish yuh—"

Gil Martin pushed the words through his teeth. Shorty couldn't hit a flock of roosting geese. And he was picking up Gil Martin's gun with his left hand.

With a wicked laugh Ace Fonde slapped lead neatly close to Shorty's head, taking off part of an ear. Maybe that did it. Shorty didn't appear to lift Gil Martin's gun from the street or aim it. He just cocked it slowly and pulled trigger.

Ace Fonde, with a dozen notches on his guns, wasn't even surprised. If he was he'd never show it. He had a bullet hole dead centered between his little eyes when he fell.

THAT OF itself shocked Gil Martin to his feet. Sallejo townies were surging toward the bank fire now. They had watched the miracle of two fast, hired gunnies die under the guns of the S-R partners who never had been known, except by a trumped up rep, to kill a man.

The slim girl's dress was smoking when Gil Martin carried her from the crumbling bank. He didn't think it meant much one way or the other but as the cold air of the outside hit them, the warm brown eyes opened and she smiled.

"Why'd you let me ride that calf, Gil?" she murmured.

There was a bullet gouge that showed blood under her coiled hair. Then, Alice Ladd-Fanchard came all alive.

"Gil—Gil Martin, there on the floor!" she exclaimed. "The things out of my bag. Dad Fanchard's paid-up receipts for his notes are in there. Deacon Carnes was sure I had 'em. Dad Fanchard sent them to me when they were paid of, before his accident."

The loan receipts were all there. But Deacon Carnes' bank was only

smoking ruins, and its vault had been wide open.

Deacon Carnes had escaped. As he had played it, money from the bank would have been found on his supposed mail order bride, Alice Ladd. But a fortune in raw gold that was supposed to have been exchanged for folding money was found cached in a waterproof box at the bottom of Hawk Nest lake above the S-R spread.

Deacon Carnes told it himself when he had been assured he had no chance to live. He had been halfway through the bank window when the bullet had broken his leg and he had narrowly missed bleeding to death.

The Deacon lived to make the one-way trip to Canon City pen. He had intented to commit murder, but he had missed. He was to find that being a life-termer at Canon City could cause a man to pray longer and louder than being the boss banker of Sallejo.

THE ANGUS cattle Gil Martin and Shorty used to stock the old S-R was a tough breed. Sallejo soon forgot its gold boom days. But one evening Alice Martin who had been Alice Ladd-Fanchard, told Gil something she had kept secret for more than a year.

"Now that there's to be another Gil," she said softly. "We won't ever tell him how his mother was once a gun shootin' hellion, will we?"

"You, Allie?"

The brown-eyed woman nodded gravely.

"I guess I lost it in the fire that night, Gil," she said. "But I meant to kill Deacon Carnes. I busted his leg with the derringer I had hidden out, but it was an accident."

Gil Martin's eyes held a quizzical smile.

"And we won't tell little Gil either that I downed that gunman, Jim Ensler," he said. "It was just as much of an accident as Shorty rubbing out Ace Fonde with a lefthanded shot."

The brown-eyed woman wrinkled her forehead, then she smiled.

"It's real cattle country under Hawk Nest lake, Gil," she said. "So we'll keep it strictly between us that the gold lode feeding all them placer creek comes out from under the lake on Dad Fanchard's spread where we're raisin' the Percherons. Sallejo's a right nice town for all of us. We wouldn't want another boom, would we, Gil?"

"One was enough to give Deacon Carnes life in Canon City," said Gil Martin quietly. "We'll leave it that way."

WATCH OUT FOR HOMER KETCHUM

A True Fact Article

by Rex Whitechurch

HOMER KETCHUM quit riding Pony Express at Saint Jo and took a job driving stagecoach between Texarkana and Windfield, Kansas. He was 21-years old a splendid horseman and one of Johnny Fry's best friends. Railroads had put the P.E. out of business. Homer liked horses and, the stageline, a small affair that occasionally carted express and small freight across country to inland spots, needed young men like Homer Ketchum.

Express strongboxes were closely guarded. Even though railroads handled express at a great saving of time, not infrequently Wells Fargo shipments of gold found their way to the stageline, due to numerous train robberies.

Homer's antiquated Concord was a heavy, rumbling affair that did not afford much comfort to the travelers who had to ride in it. One night when Homer was just pulling out of Texarkana, a band of masked men stopped him in the moonlight.

"Stand and deliver!"

Homer felt a tightness in his chest and his blood began to boil. Under a tarpaulin on the roof was a small square handtrunk belonging to a pas-

senger whose appearance suggested the schoolteacher or clerk. The pale young man stuck his head out and one of the owlhoots fired a gun. He quickly withdrew.

Calmly Homer twisted about on the seat. It was a swift movement of his hands that dropped the trunk into the road. Dust swirled up.

"Git!" cried the bandit leader.

Homer lashed his horse and screaming like an Indian, sent them around the bend in the road.

"That trunk," he muttered to himself, "saved the gold, provided they don't discover their mistake and overhaul me." It was about five miles to a stop called Cottonwood. Homer let the horses have it.

He gave no thought to the danger of losing his job for surrendering the passenger's trunk instead of the Wells Fargo box. That was the least of his worries. "There can't be ten thousand dollars in that school-teachers trunk," he said. "I'll bet all he's got in it are clothes and trinkets. It's better to pay him for his stuff than to lose ten thousand in gold."

He reached Cottonwood without mishap. He opened the door for his only passenger. "We'll have time for coffee here," he said. "We'll be in Winfield before very long."

The passenger was about thirty years old, a blond young man with sideburns and a pale handsome face. He had a decided nervousness of manner.

"That bandit almost got me," he complained. "What were they after?"

"The strongbox," said Homer. "A shipment of gold for the Winfield banks."

"You threw the box down in the road and they got it," the teacher insisted. "How will they get it open?"

"Brother," Homer said, "that's not my worry." But inwardly he was shaking. He'd made a quick decision and, for all he knew, a poor one. Funny those bandits hadn't pursued him. Maybe they'd carried the trunk to their hideout before trying to open it, certain they had the gold. There was a good deal of similarity in the trunk and the strongbox. But in the shimmer of moonlight the owlhoots couldn't have missed seeing the difference. "Something funny." Homer muttered.

They soon were on their way again. The passenger made no inquires about the trunk. They had picked up another traveler and the young man was entertaining her. She was young and very attractive and bound for Winfield.

All the way to Windfield Homer Ketchum thought about the quick decision he had been forced to make. A cold sweat drenched him. He'd had no right to relinquish the passenger's baggage. Of course he could always say that he had mistaken the trunk for the strongbox, if it came to a showdown. But even then, there was danger of losing his job for incompetency.

HE DRAGGED his horses to a stop in front of the Winfield station. Homer turned his horses over to the attendant there. He sauntered into the depot. Three heavily armed peace officers were waiting to escort the gold to the bank.
the town marshal.

Homer talked to Captain Rankin,

"I guess I'll get hell when I go in there and the express agent finds out what I done. Your gold's all right. The strongbox is safe and sound. But that fellow coming this way with the umbrella—he's out a trunk full of personal property.

Rankin stared at the passenger and then looked at Homer Ketchum. "You Missourians have a remarkable sense of humor," he said. "It was a funny idea, giving the bandits the passenger's trunk instead of ten thousand dollars in gold. I swear to thunder it was."

Homer frowned and pulled at a lock of curly black hair. "I don't see where it was funny," he snapped, pulling away from Rankin. He then strode vigorously into the office of the express company.

The man in charge was Claud Elliott. He knew that something was wrong and quickly came forward to meet Homer. Sweat gleamed on the latter's square face.

He explained in deail about the robbery. He said he hadn't had much

time to think. He'd acted on impulse. It had seemed the best thing to do then, he said. The gold was worth more than the trunk. It had to be. Nobody traveled west with a trunk full of money or anything very valuable in hand luggage, certainly nothing worth as much as ten thousand in gold.

Elliott grinned expansively. He grabbed Homer by the hand and shook it until Homer was sure he'd wring it off his wrist.

"You're a cunning fellow," Elliott said. "Your quick-witted coup will bring you recognition, Ketchum, from the Wells Fargo. We need more men of your caliber who can outsmart the outlaws."

There was a heavy pounding on the door, and Homer turned ashy. "Let me handle this," Elliott said. He strode quickly forward and opened the door.

The passenger was excited and no longer pale. He waved his hands and went into an explosive outburst of pent-up emotions.

"That fellow," he said vehemently, "lost my trunk. He gave it to some road agents instead of the strongbox which they asked for. I'll take this directly to the head office of the express company."

"It's certainly too bad," Elliott said. "But you see, Mister, your trunk isn't worth ten thousand in gold. The gold, once lost, would probably never be recovered. We'll gladly pay your claim. Just sit right down there at my desk and make out a list of your missing property and state what you think you are entitled to in the way of damages. Everything is going to be all right."

The passenger nodded and crossed to the desk. He quickly put down the amount of damages he considered the express company owed him. He handed the list to Elliott who immediately paid him.

Then Elliott showed the list to Homer Ketchum. The young stagedriver took one look and nearly fainted. What he saw on the paper was enough to jolt him. It would jolt any tough, hard-fisted young fighting man. He'd been worried about the stranger's actions and his wrath and about losing his job. But what he read settled everything. He'd saved ten thousand in gold for the Wells Fargo, and what he'd lost to the banditts was:

ONE HUNDRED LEATHER BOUND BIBLES VALUED AT ONE DOLLAR EACH.

Dead Man's Hand

After August 2, 1876, if a man sitting in at a game of draw picked up his hand beheld two black aces and two black 8's, he might feel a little prick of fear at the back of his neck, and an urge to look behind him.

These were the cards that fell from the hand of Wild Bill Hickok when he was shot from behind on that date by Jack McCall, in Deadwood, South Dakota. Bystanders who picked Bill up and stretched him out on the floor of the Bell-Union Theater noted the two black aces and the two black 8's and labeled this combination "Dead Man's Hand," a name which it still bears in the gambler's vernacular.

E. L. Kibbe

The Beard and the Blue Mule

by Harry S. Channing

There's more than one way to skin a polecat, too!

NO ONE ever comes right out and calls me a liar; they don't dare to. I may be old but I'm not so danged decrepit that I couldn't take my Frontier Model down off the mantle and use it just as well now as I did back in the days before the West turned into a dude ranch.

Folks just can't seem to believe that a youngster like Jerry Dacre would have the nerve to go up against a big, powerful gent like Owen Cantrell the way he did. They smile and shake their heads like they figure it's just another dream spun out of an old man's head.

Dream nothing! It's the tarnation truth, as anyone who was in Silver City at the time will tell you. Except, of course, that they don't know the inside of the yarn, so to speak, like I do.

If I recall rightly it was about ten o'clock of one of the hottest days in summer. I was just opening up the saloon and a bunch of the boys from the Circle FF and the Rocking T were prodding me to hurry up. Seems they was thirsty.

Ed Newcomb of the Rocking T was telling me I was probably the slowest, orneriest, such-and-such of a bartender in the entire state of Arizona. Suddenly, just as I was fitting the key into the lock on the outer door of the barroom, Ed stopped, gulped and looked like he'd swallowed his tobacco. All he could do was point. I looked in the direction of his finger and saw what it was made him look plumb flabbugasted.

He came riding right down the center of the street. A regular bluebird, he was. Except for his high crowned hat,which was pure white, and his half-boots, which were black, he was dressed all in the brightest blue I ever saw. His shirt was the same blue the sky is when the sun is highest and hottest. White piping lined the collar, shoulders and even the pockets, making the blue look even deeper.

His trousers were tight-fitting over his slim legs like the old Mexican land-owners used to wear. Just a shade darker than his shirt they clung to his legs all the way down to where they were tucked into his boot tops.

He was sitting easy and comfortable in a high cantled, silver mounted saddle trimmed with swinging blue painted latigos. He looked for all the world as though no one in their right mind ever dressed any other way. The facts being, of course, that Silver City figured a man dressed up if he put on a clean pair of Levis and a checkered calico shirt. Not, mind you, that we didn't have our dandies. Owen Cantrell, bearded, blustering owner of the Rocking T even wore clothes imported from England. But bright blue? And tight fitting trousers? Never!

That wasn't all. No indeed. Folks might have just laughed at his crazy outfit but they couldn't laugh off what he was riding. I am here to swear that never a stranger sight was ever seen in Silver City.

May I fall dead this minute if he wasn't forked across the biggest sleepiest-looking Missouri mule ever born! And as if that weren't bad enough the mule was the same blue as his shirt!

YES, SIR. In Arizona, too, where no self-respecting puncher would dream of riding into town

Dacre's fist was faster than Ed Newcomb.

mounted on anything less than the spunkiest pony he could dab his loop over. Right in the heart of the cow country, by jingo, where a horse was a man's pride; something to be fought over if necessary. I'm here to tell you it stirred up every bit as much excitement in Silver City as if Santa Claus had come dusting through on a camel!

I heard Ed Newcomb mutter, "Lordy, Lordy! Cantrell will go right up straight and come down spurs out and clawin' when he sees this bird!"

He would, too. Get a little forty-rod in Owen Cantrell and he was apt to think that riding tin-horns and pilgrims out of town on the toe of his hand-tooled boots was even greater sport than racing his thoroughbred horses.

I caught a glimpse of Luke Tolliver standing out in front of his

blacksmith shop, a twenty pound hammer forgotten in his fist and staring as though he couldn't trust his old eyes anymore.

Two or three kids playing in the dusty street froze and popped their eyes nearly out of their heads at what was dead certain the strangest sight they'd ever seen.

Directly across the street Sheriff Ty Edwards took his hat off for the first time in forty years and revealed what everyone had always suspected but never been able to prove; that he was bald as a plucked chicken. He just stood there on the porch of his empty jail and gaped like the rest of us.

Not a one of the punchers who had been so all fired sure they would just naturally die of dryness if I did not open up and get 'em a drink within the minute had moved since Ed Newcomb first pointed to the stranger. They watched him dumbly as he pulled the blue mule to a stop in front of the saloon's hitch rail and dismounted. They goggled—and I helped 'em—as the stranger took his sweet time about tying up and loosening the saddle girths.

I came to just a little bit ahead of the rest of 'em and opened up the barroom. I headed straight for a special bottle I kept under the bar for emergencies. I tipped it to my lips and took a deep pull. I don't usually drink and I thought the stuff was going to eat its way out through the lining of my stomach.

I wiped the tears form my eyes and took a quick look outside. The bluebird stranger had stepped to the saloon porch and was on his way inside. To look at him you would have thought there was nothing at all unusual about his appearance or his mount.

He stepped right up to the bar and said, "Whisky, please."

I breathed a mite easier. At least he drank like a human being, even if nothing else about him was like any man ever before seen in Silver city.

I didn't rightly notice what went on in the saloon for the next few minutes, I was too busy sizing the stranger up. I do seem to recollect, thought, that there was a considerable stirring, stamping and milling around of punchers and townspeople crowding into the place to get a closer look at Mr. Bluebird.

"Yes, sir," I told him. "Whisky it is," and I poured him a tolerable portion of my best and set the bottle on the bar in front of him. He sipped the whisky first, as though he'd been burned before by barroom red-eye and wanted to experiment before he endangered his tonsils, then he tossed it down his throat as neat and smooth as an old-timer.

Except that he wasn't an old timer. Not at anything. He couldn't have been much over twenty, if the light yellow down on his smooth pink cheeks and chin were any indication. As he pushed his big white hat to the back of his head and looked at me a couple golden curls fell down on his forehead. His eyes were blue, too, and they danced with a hint of fun hiding behind them. He didn't look to be but about six feet tall, figuring boots and hat and he didn't carry much weight. Not skinny, but slim. Slim and dainty-bones as a girl.

"NOT BAD," he said. "Have one yourself. He pushed the bottle toward me and I took it. I couldn't see how one more drink could make anything more confusing than it already was.

He said, "Know anyone around these parts named Cantrell? Owen Cantrell?"

Well, sir, the silence in the saloon became suddenly very heavy. I don't know whether it was the slight edge to the stranger's voice, the tiny hint of danger behind it, or whether it was just natural in Arizona in those days to.... But, shucks, no, he probably wanted to hit Cantrell for a job. That was it. Imagine a man going up to the owner of the Rocking T on a blue mule and asking for a job!

"Cantrell?" I repeated. "Yes. There is a feller named Owen Cantrell runs

the Rocking T Ranch. 'Bout a mile out of town, straight north."

"Thanks," the youngster said. "I understand he claims to have the fastest string of blooded race horses in the country. "Is that right?"

"Ye-es," I said, slow. "I reckon you are right that he claims to have the fastest ponies. Don't know as they are not, though." I wasn't going to commit myself.

"Well," he said, "I came up from the Lost Valley country to show him how wrong he is."

I stared at him for a minute. He was serious, all right. His face was innocent as a baby's. Only his blue eyes twinkled, and I guess they always did. "Wh-what did you figure on doing to prove..."

I didn't get any farther. Before I could finish my sentence Sheriff Ty Edwards came busting through the crowd like a hill of red ants had crawled into his boots.

"Let me through," he shouted. "Stand aside, doggone it," and he elbowed his way to the bar.

Ty's entrance must have broken a spell. Everybody started to talk all at once. I guess they realized they'd been staring and they felt ashamed. There they stood, gabbing away, trying to look as though they always filled the saloon to overflowing in the forenoon.

Ty Edwards shoved right up alongside the stranger, bent his head back on his short, scrawny neck and bellowed, "You the feller came ridin' into town on that there blue mule?"

The bluebird looked at him for a moment. His pink and white face with it's nice firm mouth and clear, clean look was just as polite and attentive as it could be. He took in the sheriff's star and said, "Why, yes, I am. What can I do for you?"

I guess Ty didn't expect such a courteous answer. He blinked a couple times, then recovered. "Do fer me?" he yowled. "You can't do nothin' fer me but you can do the whole blamed town a favor by gettin' that ungodly critter out of here!"

THE STRANGER looked only mildly surprised. I wondered if he ran into the same request from the sheriffs of all the towns he rode through. "What for, Sheriff? Some law against riding into your town I haven't heard about?" His blue eyes looked at the sheriff questioningly, as though he wanted to right any wrong he might have unknowingly done.

Ty gasped. "Well, no. Don't know as there's any law again it." He looked uncertain. I could see that Ty would have much preferred to deal with a brace of bank robbers or rustlers than this polite young man in blue. "But there ought to be! That there blue mule is just raisin' hell in general. Look!"

Every head in the saloon swivelled as though on the same neck. Ty pointed to the blue mule standing at the hitching rail. It wasn't doing anything. As a matter of fact it looked to be asleep, but Ty was right: hell in general had broken out on the wide, dusty street.

The widow Baker was standing up in her two wheeled gig yelling at the top of her lungs. The old, moth-eaten bundle of bones she used for a horse had fallen down on his nose and lay there in the street, his rump in the air, his head in the dust, not moving a muscle. Later Doc Hardesty said the old buzzard-bait had fainted from the shock of seeing a blue mule. I don't know as I blamed him.

Down in front of Sam Hiler's General Store three cowponies tied to his hitching rail were kicking up the biggest ruckus of fighting, scared horse-flesh ever seen. Just as I looked they pulled the hitch rail plumb out of the ground and high-tailed it down the street, stirring up a cloud of dust that looked like one of these here modern smoke screens.

Here and there punchers who had unsuspectingly ridden into town since the bluebird's arrival were hunting leather to keep from letting sunlight between them and their pitching horses.

Right square in the middle of the

A Powerful Book-Length Mystery Novel

DIG ANOTHER GRAVE

by Don Cameron

King sat down wearily. "Don't run away. No one's going to hurt you. Take a chair." He ran his fingers through his rumpled hair. "Finding you here, and seeing him like that, my first thought was that you had killed him. Now I'm not sure."

"It was exactly the way I told you," Barbara said. "I hadn't even begun to suspect anything was wrong when you came in."

"That leaves me in a bad spot. I can't for the life of me think who could have done it, but the cops won't have any trouble making up their minds. At least a hundred people know I hated Searle's guts. Pretty nearly that many saw me knock him down an hour ago. Everybody will take it for granted that I killed him." He looked at her. "I didn't, you know."

"I can't think who could have."

"Besides me, you mean. You still think I did it, don't you?"

"I don't know... Can't the police prove what time he was killed? And can't you prove you were somewhere else?"

King scowled. "He must have been killed within the last half or three-quarters of an hour. A medical examiner can't fix the time of death to the split second. The time margin isn't wide enough to give me a clear bill."

"I can tell them he was dead when you came in..." Barbara said. "You see, I do believe you, after all."

"Don't stick your neck out. The rawest recruit on the District Attorney's staff could build a lovely case against you if he had the details... You and Searle were in love and fell out of love. Probably it could be shown that there was a serious quarrel between you. At any rate, he threatened to tell things that would embarass you and your father tried to gag him with money, but wouldn't part with as much as Searle needed... You see?"

This Novel appears complete in The September Issue of

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

street, not fifty feet from the blue mule Reverend Michael O'Hara clung to his horse with a look of astonishment on his broad, red face equalled only by the look of complete surprise on the face of his mount. The animal had come to such a sudden halt that his rear end had dragged him into a sitting position. He sat, feet spread wide, ears laid back on his head, snorting in disbelief.

The widow Baker fainted, following her horse's example.

"See what I mean?" Sheriff Edwards squeaked, his usually firm voice somewhat undermined with the excitement.

The stranger nodded. "Can't understand it," he said. "What's the matter with folks around here? You'd think they'd never seen a mule before!"

At that, Tim Keaton, the town joker, burst into laughter. He flung his head back like a full grown lobo and howled until I thought his head would tear off. His laughter was like the itch. Pretty soon everybody in the whole durned place was holding their sides. Everybody, that is, except the bluebird and Ty Edwards. I took another look at Reverend O'Hara's horse and started to chuckle myself. The chuckle turned into a live and kicking bellow and before I knew it the tears were streaming down my cheeks in rivulets.

When finally breath and strength gave out the laughter jerked and wheezed to a stop. Ty fastened a look on the youngster's face that would have paralyzed a lesser man on the spot.

"What in tunket do you mean, you young wippersnapper? Never seen a mule—Gosh all hemlock, didn't anybody ever see a blue mule before, that's for sure!"

TY WAVED his hand at the hitching rail. Sunlight glinted from the silver mounted saddle. Occasionally a long ear twitched to scare off a fly; other than that the mule stood quiet, not paying the least attention to the rumpus going on all around him. The big hunk of stubbornness was asleep!

The stranger took his hat off, held it in his hands and turned it over slowly as though he were looking for an imperfection in it, or suspected that it might have something to do with all the trouble. He looked even younger bareheaded. His hair was about as nice as a man's hair can be, without attracting a lot of nasty remarks. "That's funny," he drawled. "you mean to tell me that they don't have blue mules in this part of the country?"

Ty sputtered behind his teeth without managing to get out anything that resembled English. I answered for him.

"No, stranger, they don't. First one I ever saw, and I've lived here all my life. How come you ride such a critter?"

"How come?" He looked at me as though I'd asked him how come the desert's full of sand. "Why because a blue mule is the fastest animal on four legs, that's why. And because Blue Streak out there is the fastest of all the blue mules in the country!"

One thing about me—I know when I'm licked. I've heard some mighty smooth attacks on the truth and I've maybe stretched a point myself now and then but this was the first time I ever had a feller stand up to me and lie, and make me willing to fight any man that dared call him a liar.

"Stranger," I said, "have a drink. It's on the house. You can't buy a drink in my place if you stay here for a hundred years." I filled his glass for him. "My name's Windy. They call me that 'cause I don't talk much."

"Thanks," he grinned. "My name's Dacre. Jerry Dacre. I appreciate your drinks but I don't reckon I'll be staying here any longer than it takes to show this Owen Cantrell boy how fast a blue mule is." Dacre jerked a thumb at Ty Edwards. "What are we going to do with the sheriff?"

I noticed for the first time that the latest information given out by the unperturbed Mr. Dacre had been too much for poor old Ty. His face was

getting purple and little bubbling noises were popping out from behind his puffed out cheeks.

"Must have got his false teeth caught in his windpipe again," I said, and whacked Ty a stiff slap on the back. Teeth flew from his mouth and fell on the floor. Ty whooshed in a great lungful of air.

"My teeth," he gasped. "Dang it, Windy, how many times do I have to tell yuh not to thump me like that? I've swallered 'em."

I pointed silently to the floor. Ty grunted something the Reverend O'Hara wouldn't have liked, picked up the teeth, wiped them on the sleeve of his shirt and stuck them back in his mouth.

"Well," he said, "It's dangerous, that's what it is."

"What's dangerous," I wanted to know, "blue mules or slapping you on the back when your teeth slip the corral?"

"Both!" Ty exploded. "Consarn it, young feller," he said, turning to the amused and smiling Jerry Darce, "I've a good mind to lock you up!"

"Lock me up? What for, Sheriff?"

"For disturbing the peace, that's what. And....and for picking a fight with Owen Cantrell."

"Fight? I don't want to fight him, Sheriff. I just want to race him."

"Sure you want to race him. On a blue mule that couldn't outrun a three legged heifer. That's what I mean. Cantrell'll just naturally shoot yuh pumb full of holes when he hears about it."

"Oh no he won't," a third voice butted in. It was Ed Newcomb, shouldering up beside Ty, a dark frown on his heavy, unshaven face. Ed stood there in front of Dacre, his thumbs hooked in the gun belt that slanted across his waist. "Owen Cantrell just happens to be my boss. I don't figure to have anyone making funny cracks about him or his race horses. Stranger, I'm asking you real polite to get out of town..pronto!"

THERE WAS a general scurrying of people getting out of the way. Ed Newcomb was a pretty good boy. He'd come down from Montana the year before and started in as top hand for Cantrell. He was a quiet enough feller, and no one had ever seen him fight, but there was something about him that convinced everybody that he could, if he wanted tc.

Jerry Dacre's almost invisible blonde eyebrows raised the merest fraction of an inch. "Why," he asked, "is your boss afraid that Blue Streak will beat his best horse?"

Blue Streak! I took another look at the critter. It was still apparently asleep. It looked less like a streak of

anything than I had ever imagined.

"We don't want any more of your nonsense, stranger!" Ed Newcomb said. "Get on your mule and get out before I throw you out."

Dacre ignored him and turned to me, "I understand this Cantrell is a gambler, too. Do you suppose, Windy, that he's enough of a sport to put up a little money on a race between his best nag and my Blue Streak?"

"Nag?" Ed Newcomb roared. "Why you dirty...."

Ed swung his right fist with every ounce of his two hundred pound frame behind it.

Darce barely moved his head and the blow went sizzling past. The punch had Newcomb off balance and before he could regain it Jerry Darce's small, almost ladylike fist exploded on the point of his jaw.

It made a crack like a pistol shot. If Ed Newcomb's boots had been a size too big he would have sailed out of 'em. As it was he landed on the floor with a crash that shook the whole barroom.

As he sat up, shaking the cobwebs from his mind and holding a hand to his jaw, Dacre spoke to him, still in the same cool tones. "Get on your horse and ride out to wherever it is your boss keeps himself holed up. Tell him I've got fifteen thousand dollars here," Darce slapped his waistline, indicating a money belt, I guess, "that says Blue Streak will leave him behind in the dust. Now get!"

Ed Newcomb stood up. He regarded Darce with a glare that had no apparent effect on the young bluebird. "All right," he said, "I'll do just that. And, Mister, you'll take my advice, you won't be here when Cantrell comes looking for you."

Ty Edwards stared at Ed's receding back, then looked at Dacre. "I dunno," he said. "I kinda think I'm a-bed dreaming. None o' this makes sense." Ty removed his hat for the second time in his life and scratched his palely glistening head.

"You don't mean to tell me that mule can beat a horse, do you?"

(Continued On Page 88)

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

(Continued From Page 87)

Dacre nodded. "Of course. A blue mule is born only once in a trillion births, normally. Down in the Lost Valley country we know the secret of breeding 'em so we have lots more then that. They look slow, but don't let that fool you."

I stuck in a word or two. I was dying to find out something. "But why the flashy get-up, Dacre? How come the all blue clothes?"

Jerry Dacre looked shocked. "Flashy clothes? These aren't my flashy clothes. This is my travelling outfit. What would you have me wear

I groaned and gave up.

TY EDWARDS rolled his eyes and slowly unpinned the Sheriff's star from his shirt. He threw it on the bar, and addressing no one in particular but everyone in general, said, "This county doesn't need a sheriff, it needs a keeper! I'm quitting."

Ty stalked out, looking for all the world like a man who fully expects to wake up at any moment and find that he has been in the grip of a particularly fantastic nightmare.

"Now,' said Dacre, "tell me about Cantrell. What sort of a man is he?"

I had to shout at him to make myself heard above the general clamor that people were putting out. The saloon wasn't quite as full now as it had been. Matter of fact, just about everybody that was worth anything had left and the remaining men were the original bunch of Circle FF and Rocking T men who had come in town on their day off.

"Well, Dacre," I said, "it's like this." I poured him a drink and took a small one myself. "Cantrell is just about the richest man in the county. He inherited the Rocking T from old Benjamin Tate, a bachelor. Tate a liking to Cantrell when Owen drifted down out of the north and hit him for a job.

"Cantrell's a big man, and no one's ever seen him without his short, black beard. It sorta gives him an air of command. Didn't take him long to be

(Continued On Page 90)

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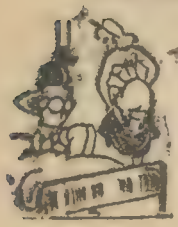

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(Continued From Page 88)

old Ben Tate's foreman, either. There isn't anything squeamish about Owen Cantrell. He rides roughshod and those who don't like it can just get out of the way."

"How long has he owned the Rocking T?"

"Oh, about five years, I reckon. He came down here about seven years ago, I guess it was. Soon as he got his hands on the ranch he went hog wild, imported some real peppy looking racing horses, bought all his clothes from some swanky tailor in England. Figures he's just about the best man in these parts, too." I was watching young Dacre like a hawk. "What you figguring on doing?"

He just smiled. Doggone it, I couldn't help liking him, even if he was as loco as a sunstroke jack rabbit! "Oh, nothing much," he said. "I might end up as the new owner of the Rocking T, though. You never can tell."

And that was all I could get out of him. He wouldn't say just where the Lost Valley he said he came from was, he wouldn't talk about the Blue Streak. He just got me to fix him up with a room in the hotel part of my place and had the boy at the livery stable take care of his mule, then he said he was going to rest until Cantrell showed up and that was the last I saw of him until evening.

ALONG ABOUT six thirty the saloon began filling. I had Tommy Jessup behind the bar helping me because I knew it was going to be a big night.

Dacre wandered in from upstairs as casually as though not a soul was aware of his presence, although every eye in the room was focused on him.

He walked up to the bar, moving with a soft grace that made you think of a ghost floating across the floor. "Hello, Windy," he said. "How's your supply of liquor holding out?"

"Good enough," I said. From outside came the sound of horses hooves eating up the dirt and a couple gun shots. Then someone let out a wild cowboy yell as if in defiance of the progress of civilization. "And you

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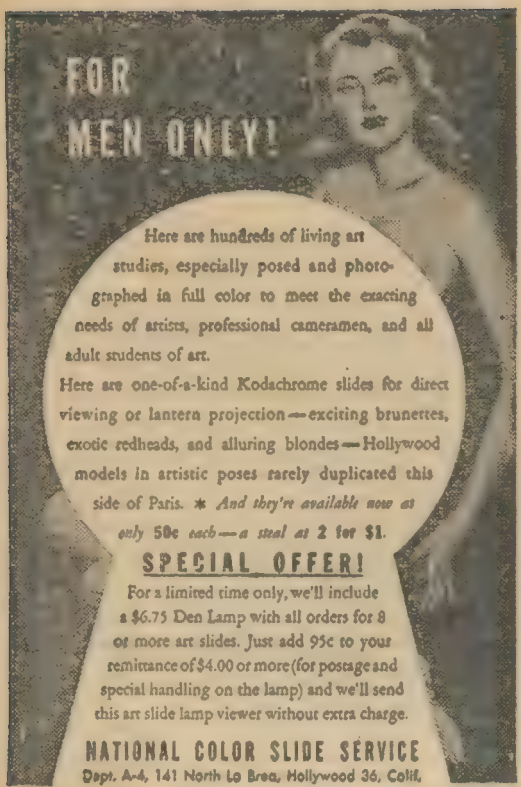

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(Continued From Page 90)

better have a shot of it right now. Here comes Owen Cantrell!"

Sure enough, a minute later in walked Cantrell, followed by a grinning Ed Newcomb carrying a bottle under each arm.

A blanket of silence fell over the room. Dacre was toying with his empty glass, twirling it around in his fingers, looking at it intently, the same way he had with his hat.

Cantrell strode right up to the bar and planted his bulk in front of the bluebird. I watched Jerry give him a slow, careful inspection, taking in the fine quality of the clothes, the heavy gold watch chain strung across the no longer flat stomach, and the beard; short, black, trimmed and neat.

Cantrell, still without saying a word, stuck out his hand. I should, perhaps, say paw. I was as big as a shovel, padded with muscle and hairy on the knuckles. Owen Cantrell could straighten horseshoes with those hooks of his. I hoped Dacre had sense enough not to take it."

"Well," said the bluebird. "This is mighty friendly of you, stranger. You wouldn't be Owen Cantrell, would you?" The young fool put his hand right in Cantrell's and shook it.

"That's right, son," Cantrell said. His voice was lower than I had ever before heard it. Usually his bull bellow could be heard back at the Rocking T. Tonight it was just a rumbling mutter that started deep down in his chest and came out without the least effort. "I'm Cantrell. Glad to meet you."

He squeezed. I saw him. I was right where I could see the muscles along his arm and shoulder bunch as he put his beef behind the handshake.

I couldn't help feeling sorry for Dacre. He was such a nice kid, I hated to have him humiliated in front of everybody. I'd seen Cantrell shake hands before. Even with his own men he thought it was fun to force them to their knees begging that he release the terrible, crushing pressure.

But Dacre didn't go to his knees. He just smiled right into Owen

(Continued On Page 94)

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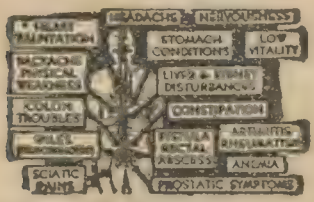

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(Continued From Page 92)

Cantrell's burning dark eyes and seemed to taunt the bearded man to do his worst. He didn't flinch. He didn't bat an eye.

I WAS surprised. The whole crowd was surprised. We wondered where in the name of all that was good the youngster in the blue outfit was getting all his strength. But Cantrell....I once saw a young, fresh stallion wild from the hills whip the daylights out of an older stallion, king of a small bunch of mares and colts. The look of hurt bewilderment on that old stallion's arrogant, proud face when he realized that he had met a strength that could match and outdo his own was very much the same as the expression that came over Cantrell's face when it dawned on him that the blonde and smiling youngster in front of him had a grip that equalled his.

"And I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Cantrell," Dacre replied. "I understand you've got a horse or two that you think is pretty fast?"

"Yes, I have." Cantrell released Dacre's hand, glad for the chance to save his face. He nodded his head at Ed Newcomb. "Ed tells me you've got a mule....a blue mule....that you think can beat anything I've got."

Dacre nodded. "That's right, I've got plenty of money that says so too." He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled out a bulging money belt. "Are you a sporting man, Mr. Cantrell?"

I could see that it was an effort for Cantrell to hold his temper in check. He was a proud man. There was no telling how he felt about a man having the gall to think that a mule could beat his blooded horses.

With the same restraint in his voice Cantrell said, "Yes. I'm a sport. Especially where money is concerned." His eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't be joking, or bluffing by any chance, would you?"

"Oh, no," said Dacre. "I like money just as much as you do. How much can you cover?"

"Ed. Give me that deed," Cantrell said. Ed Newcomb grinned and

handed him a sheaf of papers. "This, my young cockeral," said Cantrell, "is the deed to the Rocking T. Ed told me I'd better bring it along in case we didn't get back to the ranch tonight. I'm putting it up against your money."

Dacre frowned. "Well, I guess it's all right. I'd prefer cash, though."

Cantrell nodded. "I thought you would. It happens, though, that most of my money is in the bank now. I don't carry it around on me like you do. You wouldn't have been figuring on that, would you?"

"What for?"

"Well, if I didn't have the money, you could refuse to race. As it is, Ed thinks I should stay in town tonight and see that you don't run off!"

Jerry Dacre didn't bat an eye. "I was thinking of that myself. Suppose we set the race for eight o'clock tomorrow morning. The one that doesn't show up by eight o'clock forfeits the bets, and we'll leave it to Windy, here, to handle the money."

Cantrell agreed, although it rocked him back on his heels to have Jerry turn the tables on him. He had been trying to make Jerry out a four-flusher.

I put the money and the deed to Cantrell's ranch in my safe. Dacre suggested that a round of drinks might be a good way to seal the bargain so I fixed 'em up with a bottle apeice to pour from. Cantrell was a heavy drinker, but I had never seen him drunk. He used to laugh and say that his beard absorbed the alcohol.

They drank and then Ed Newcomb suggested some poker to pass the time away. He patted the bottle he had brought with him. "Got some good stuff here," he said, "been saving it for a special occasion." Apparently he had forgotten his little brush with Dacre that morning.

"Thanks," said Jerry. "A little poker, but no whisky for me. I've got enough of that liquid fire of Windy's in me now to start up a distillery.

I DIDN'T get a chance to hear any more of their conversation because I was kept busy serving my

(Continued On Page 96)

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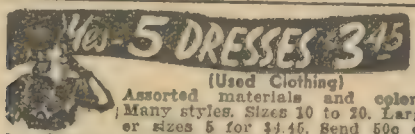

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(Continued From Page 95)

thirsty customers. Along about midnight though a funny thing happened.

Owen Cantrell and Ed Newcomb passed out cold. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

"That stuff of Ed's must have been pretty strong," suggested Dacre. There was a devil of laughter in his blue eyes. "What'll we do with 'em?"

I shrugged. "Give me a hand, a couple of you fellows," I said. "I'll put in 'em in one of the vacant rooms upstairs for the night.

Tim Keaton and Jerry Dacre carried the sodden Cantrell up to a room beside Dacre's and Luke Tolliver and I lugged Ed.

"Give me a call about seven, will you, Windy? Dacre asked. "I don't want to be late for the race."

I said I would and went down to close up the saloon. I couldn't figure it. I wondered if Dacre would take his chance and dust out during the night, or if he'd stay and lose his money, as lose it he would if he raced. That was sure. I didn't believe a word he said about his precious blue mule being fast.

Next morning at seven I called him. I called Cantrell too, but he wasn't in his room.

"He's gone back to the ranch," Ed Newcomb yawned sleepily. "Says he wants to get the worst looking crowbait in our corral to race the mule with, just to show the bluebird up all the more."

AT TEN minutes before eight the main street was lined with people, but there wasn't a horse in sight. I soon found out why. As I stepped out of the saloon I saw Dacre setting the blue mule. I guess folks figured it was no use try to ride into town as long as the Blue Streak was around.

"You all ready, Jerry?" I called.

He gave me a big grin. He looked as confident as though he had already won the race.

At just about eight o'clock a puff

of smoke rose out on the road that came from Rocking T.

"There comes Cantrell now," Luke Tolliver said. He still couldn't get used to the blue mule and I guess he was on Cantrell's side because the disappointment in his voice was heavy when he saw that it wasn't Cantrell.

It was Clint Bellew, one of Cantrell's riders. He pulled to a stop in front of my saloon, the nearest he dared push his cayuse toward the Blue Streak. Everybody was shouting questions at him all at once.

"Where's Cantrell?" bellowed Luke Tolliver beside me.

Bellew stood up in his stirrups and waved his hat until people quieted down.

"Cantrell's gone!" he said. "He's left the country!" He clapped his hat back on his head with disgust "It's the damndest thing I ever heard of," he said, at the top of his voice for all to hear. "Along about seven this morning we heard a horse pounding away from the ranchouse as fast as it would go. We got up to see who it was in such a hurry and I'll be cussed if the ranchouse wasn't on fire. The boys are back there now. I think they got it just about put out ...."

"B. what about Cantrell?" I asked.

"He's gone, I tell you. That chestnut stallion of his that no one else could get near is gone to. He's left the country for sure. His safe was open and a lot of papers in it burned ....."

"Come with me." The voice at my elbow was that of Jerry Dacre. Beside him was Ed Newcomb. They looked like old friends. Dacre nodded at Ed and said, "Windy, I want you to meet the new owners of the Rocking T Ranch!"

I suddenly felt perfectly certain that I had lost my sanity. "Let's go get a drink," I said. "I need an explanation."

"....so you see," Jerry Dacre was saying over the third drink, "Ed and I have been friends since we were kid's. When Ed came down here from Montana he recognized Owen Cantrell as the man who nearly killed my father in a bank robbery. Candrell's name had been Jameson Rutledge then and he didn't have a beard. He didn't recognize Ed because Ed and I were just kids when it happened seven years ago.

"Ed wrote me about it but I could not come until just a little while ago after my father finally died.

"Ed and I cooked up the whole plan so we'd be sure Cantrell would race. We arranged it so he wouldn't have enough cash on hand and would have to put up the deed to the ranch. Ed did a lot of suggesting to him that helped, too."

"How about the liquor?" Ed grinned. "Tell him about that, Mike. That was my idea, too."

"Mike? Who's Mike?" I asked.

"Me," said Jerry. "My real name is Jerold Dacre Michaels."

"And the liquor?"

"Doped," said Jerry. "We figured Ed was the only one who could plant it without arousing suspicion."

"What about the clothes? And the Lost Valley?"

"Just a part of the bait."

"How about the mule? Whose idea was that?" I demanded.

"We went fifty-fifty on that idea," Jerry laughed. "I supplied the blue paint and Ed supplied the mule."

"All right," I said. "Fine. You're the new owners of the Rocking T. But there's one very important thing you haven't told me. Why did Cantrell leave the country? He wasn't that type of man. He would have shot it out with you."

Jerry poured another drink and put it in my hand. "Windy, he said, "It was too perfect to be passed up. After you went to bed last night I made sure that as soon as Cantrell woke up he'd hightail it out of the country. You know what I did?"

"No! Damn it. That's what I'm asking you!"

He leaned over closer to me and said, "I shaved off his beard!"

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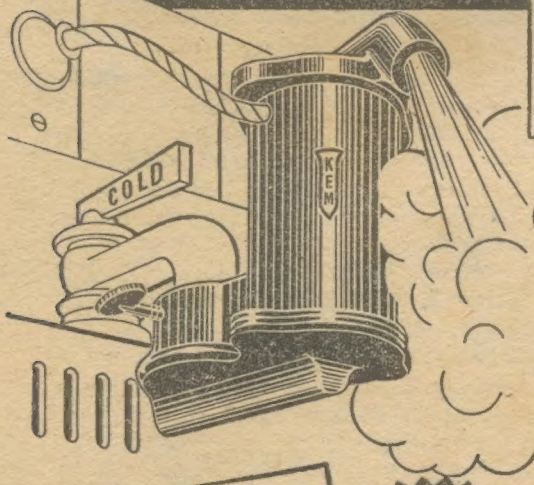

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You don't have to send a cent. Just fill in coupon and mail today to get your complete NEW HOME RECORD MAKER. Sent C.O.D. for only $8.49 plus postage and C.O.D. . . . or send check or money order for $8.49 and we pay postage.

Additional blank records $2.00 per dozen (24 sides)

RECORDOGRAPH CORP. OF AMERICA, Dept. TK-101
230 GRAND STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Send entire RECORD MAKING OUTFIT, including 6 blank two-sided records.

☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $8.49 plus postage.
☐ Send additional blank records at $2 per dozen.

Name_____

Address_____

City, Zone, State_____

☐ I enclose $8.49, send complete outfit postpaid.

MEN! DON'T STAY FAT

You CAN LOSE UP TO 7 POUNDS IN ONE WEEK

SAFELY! WITHOUT RISKING HEALTH

Good for Ladies, too!

NO DRUGS
NO STARVATION
NO EXERCISE
NO MASSAGE
NOTHING TO WEAR

LOSE UGLY FAT NOW . . . Notice the difference in POUNDS and INCHES the very first week, whether Overweight 10 or 100 Pounds . . . even if burdened with Fat for many years (illness excepted). The Protam Plan controls weight . . . once down to normal, it helps retain your new "athlete's waistline" as long as you like . . . NOT A TEMPORARY LOSS. Protam is not a Drug, Laxative or Thyroid . . . absolutely Harmless . . . Is Good For You.

OXIDIZES EXCESS FAT

Thousands of Overweight people report sensational results, some Losing 30 Pounds in 40 Days, others enthuse about "How Well They Feel" while Reducing. To achieve same results . . . Just take Protam as directed, Once or Twice a day, according to how fast you wish to Lose Weight. Protam is a FOOD, Scientifically Formulated, Laboratory Tested and Approved, Fortified with energy-giving PROTEINS, AMINO ACIDS, MINERALS and VITAMINS. The Protam Plan reacts quickly . . . Drastically Cuts Down Fat Producing Calories. USES UP ACCUMULATED EXCESS FAT. Lose Ugly Fat Economically, Simply, Pleasantly, without risking your health. Look and feel better, see bulges disappear within the first weeks.

REDUCE WITHIN 10 DAYS OR MONEY REFUNDED

FREE 10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

ORDER TODAY . . . You risk NO MONEY, not even postage. You must Lose Pounds and Inches within Ten Days or your Money will be Refunded Immediately, including postage. Your decision is final. Just Mail Coupon Today . . . NOW. On delivery simply pay postman $2.50 . . . begin Losing Fat the first few days. Enjoy New Energy . . . Have confidence in your appearance.

SEND NO MONEY

ASSOCIATED NUTRITION PRODUCTS, INC.
150 Nassau St., Dept. 2003, New York 7, N.Y.

Send me in plain package the 8 oz. Protam Plan for a Ten Day Free Trial. I will pay postman $2.50 plus postage. This money will be refunded immediately, including postage, if I do not safely REDUCE to my satisfaction within 10 Days. I RISK NOTHING.

NAME _____
Print Plainly

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

(Sorry, No Canadian Orders.)

We Pay Postage if Check or Money Order Enclosed.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

"THE COLT MASTER"

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER